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## COLLINGWOOD'S ORIGINAL REASON FOR EXISTENCE

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A stranger, with no knowledge of Collingwood's early history, arriving in town today would have no idea of the original reason for the town's existence: the opening of a railway linking Georgian Bay and the upper Great Lakes with Toronto. When the Hen and Chickens Harbour (the original name of the place, so named from one larger [the Hen] and a number of smaller islands [the Chickens] near the entrance to the harbour) was chosen in the early 1850's as the site for the terminus of a portage railway from Toronto to Georgian Bay, the present townsite at the time was described as a dismal cedar swamp. A name more dignified than one reflecting barnyard animals was needed for the important transportation terminus that would be built here and the directors chose the name "Collingwood Harbour" after Vice-Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood (1748-1810) of the Royal Navy. Eventually the word "harbour" was dropped.

The original concept for the railway was as the shortest, practical route from Toronto north to a point somewhere on Georgian Bay to facilitate the movement of people and freight between Lake Ontario and “the west” which, in those days, meant largely Chicago and also isolated outposts of civilisation on the north shore of Georgian Bay and Lake Superior.

This grand scheme, after a number of false starts, finally resulted in the completion of the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Union Railway, so named for the three lakes the rails “united” (Georgian Bay has occasionally, in times past, been referred to as “the sixth Great Lake” even though it *is* part of Lake Huron). The railway with its wood-burning locomotives officially opened in Collingwood on January 1, 1855 and so began the story of a boomtown. There was a frenzy of building and since much of Simcoe County was covered in virgin forests it seemed that the supply of wood could last forever. Wooden stores, factories, houses, hotels, stables and saloons—especially saloons—sprang up almost overnight to service the sea of humanity that passed through Collingwood by rail and then by ships going north and west and vice versa going south to Toronto. Collingwood was predicted to become the “Chicago of the North”.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when railways were the last word in ground transportation and when what few roads existed were mired in

mud or buried in snow for a large part of the year, the railway was a lifeline for Collingwood and the railway station was the principal point of contact with the outside world via the telegraph wires that ran alongside the tracks. Not long after this grand beginning, economic conditions were not good and the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway (nicknamed the “Oats, Straw and Hay” by locals because of some of the freight it carried) was struggling to stay afloat at the time of the “Crash of ‘57”. The railway was reorganized in 1858 as the Northern Railway of Canada and in 1872 the tracks were extended from Collingwood to Meaford. In 1879 the Northern amalgamated with the second railway to arrive in Collingwood—the Hamilton & North Western Railway—becoming the Northern & North Western and this name was retained until taken over by the Grand Trunk Railway in 1888.

By 1923 both of the railway lines coming into Collingwood had become part of the Canadian National Railways system and the tracks between Collingwood and Barrie would remain so until the mid-1990’s, the tracks linking Collingwood to Hamilton having been taken up in 1960. With the loss of the heavy freight business from the closure of the Collingwood Shipyard and the Collingwood Terminals grain elevator, the CNR lifted all the tracks from Meaford right back to the Pretty River spur that went to the distillery, the starch plant and the glass factory near Highway 26 in the east end of town. The CNR completed

its exit from Collingwood in 1996 when it abandoned the railway from Barrie to Collingwood. This section was subsequently purchased by the municipalities of Collingwood and Barrie and named the Barrie-Collingwood Railway commencing in 1998 to serve customers in the east end industrial park. This short line received its freight cars at its interchange with the CPR at Utopia and there were high hopes that the railway would remain a viable enterprise.

By 2011 the railway was servicing only one or two of the industries in the east end of Collingwood, the tracks were in poor shape due to many years of lack of maintenance resulting in a speed limit of 10 miles per hour for the locomotive, and the Collingwood Town Council of the day decided to shut down the money-losing service. The right-of-way from Collingwood to Utopia (where the tracks cross the mainline of the Canadian Pacific Railway) was sold to Simcoe County in 2018 for future use as a transportation corridor. The portion of the railway from Utopia to Barrie and Innisfil is still active with a few freight customers.

Collingwood no longer depends on the railway but there was a time when the town did depend on the railway in a very big way. Rail fans know of two marvellous books by Ian Wilson called *Steam at Allandale* and *Steam Scenes of Allandale* in which he describes the day-to-day operations of the various

railway branch lines that radiated out from Allendale in the first half of the 1950's. There are many photos of train activity in and around Collingwood as well as in many other places in these books. This was a time when much freight was carried on trains, a time when the enormously long transport trucks of today were unknown. It was also a time when branch line passenger trains still held a lucrative contract to carry the mail even though in the post-World War II era fewer passengers were travelling on those branch line trains. The dieselization of the Allendale divisional point of the CNR had not yet been accomplished in the early 1950's [it *was* accomplished by October 1958] and so, with the exception of one trouble-prone diesel passenger train set introduced in the early 1950's, the motive power on the railway to Collingwood was steam locomotives that, in one form or another, had powered the railway since it arrived in 1855. Many of the coal-burning locomotives in use in the 1950's on the two branch lines into Collingwood had been built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and were nearing the end of their working lives. The wail of a locomotive's steam whistle and the clang of its bell was a very familiar sound in that busy era when multiple passenger and freight trains working in and passing through Collingwood were a daily occurrence. Some of what follows is adapted from an interview I did with Rick Leswick who wrote a book called *Riding The Hog Special—The Trains of Collingwood*, published in

2014. He dedicated an entire chapter to my reminiscences of my experiences with the railway in my younger years. Rick sold all of the copies he had printed and unfortunately he passed away the following year at age 61.

I grew up at 639 Ste. Marie St. (east side of the street). Being part of the post-war baby boom, I was fortunate to witness the railway in its busiest days before modern highways and trucks spelled the doom of railway freight and before those same modern highways, newer cars and the railway's loss of the mail contract spelled the doom of branch line passenger trains. The opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959 also led to the end of the trans-shipment of prairie grain by rail to Montreal for export from the numerous grain elevators around Georgian Bay. This shipment of prairie grain was a *major* source of revenue for the CNR.

In the late 1940's and well into the 1950's there were no buildings between our house and the railway tracks coming into town from Allandale. From either my bedroom window or the back yard I had a clear view of trains coming and going even though from that distance they looked smaller in size than seeing them up-close. The first indication that a train was coming into Collingwood was the sound of the locomotive's whistle sounding for the crossing at the Poplar Sideroad. Before leaving for school in the morning I could see a freight

train arriving, often rattling a long string of empty 40 ft. long boxcars to be spotted at the Collingwood Terminals to be loaded with grain. The locomotive would come to a stop at the Hume Street crossing while a brakeman turned the switch just north of Hume St. for the passing track that would take the train into the rail yard in that huge space of real estate bounded by St. Paul, Ontario, Minnesota and Huron Streets thus leaving the main track clear for other trains. It was no accident that the east-west streets in the area were named Ontario, Simcoe and Huron because that was the original name of the railway in 1855. A second freight train—the daily way freight, so named because it stopped at multiple stations and sidings along the way to drop off freight cars (and pick up empties) for local businesses—would also arrive with an assortment of box cars, tank cars, hopper cars, flat cars, gondola cars and, of course, the caboose.

The Collingwood railyard had five parallel tracks in the main portion of the yard; east of these was the air-operated turntable in what is now the location of the Friendship Garden. Completing the main portion of the railyard, there were two tracks alongside the freight sheds on the east side of St. Paul St. and a nearby ramp track where I watched men unloading sheets of gyproc (drywall) one at a time onto a truck for a local building supply dealer. The south end of the rail yard had a siding for Regent Oil just south of Ontario St. At the north end

of the rail yard a siding curved off to the east to service the Bryan Lumber Co. and the British-American Oil Depot on Huron St. Another siding crossed Huron St. and disappeared through a gate into the Steel Stockyard on the east side of the Shipyard where ships would continue to be built and launched into Drydock No. 1 until 1958. North of Huron St. where there are now houses, a siding curved east into D. G. Cooper's Coal and Lumber Yard. At this same place the tracks continued toward the harbour with a siding servicing the Sheer Leg Crane while the main track continued along the edge of the breakwall to the Collingwood Terminals.

At the grain elevator there were four parallel tracks for box cars that were to be loaded with grain. Two of those tracks extended right through the elevator's breezeway and beyond out to where Millennium Park is now located. On one of the four tracks empty box cars had their door openings reduced in size from the floor up with "grain doors"—boards nailed to the inside of the car to hold the grain in, leaving an opening of 2-3 feet at the top so the workman could climb out using a ladder and so the grain could be poured in—and were subsequently shunted onto tracks north of the elevator to be winched forward and filled with grain. This was also a continual source of revenue for the person supplying the lumber for the grain doors. One locomotive would be assigned to the Terminals for the day slowly shuffling empty and loaded cars and gradually



building up a long row of grain-filled cars stretching from the grain elevator to just north of Huron St. before leaving town in the late afternoon. This locomotive would often be joined by another one later in the day to haul the completed train. Box cars were the norm for hauling grain until the Federal Government, in 1972, started to purchase the familiar cylinder-shaped grain hopper cars with the words “Government of Canada” painted on them. Filled from the top and emptied from the bottom they were much less labour-intensive than box cars which were phased out for grain transport in the mid 1990’s.

Watching a “Grain Extra”, as these unit trains were called, leave town was a thrilling sight. Two locomotives—a “double header”—were required to haul the heavy tonnage. Driving wheels would spin (the sound of the exhaust could be heard a mile away at our house) and two enormous plumes of black smoke would be blasted into the sky as the two engines at the head of the train struggled to get their heavy load moving across Huron St. and through the railyard. I could watch the train from my back yard and when I was older I would pedal my bike furiously down to the Hume St. crossing to watch the train go by. The ground would shake from the rhythm of the two engines blasting their way upgrade as the whistle on the lead engine screamed for the Hume St. crossing. It was customary to wave to the engineers and the brakeman riding the rear

platform of the caboose as the train went by. Sometimes this would be followed by another shorter train with one engine. Since each freight locomotive travelled with its own caboose, the double-headed grain extras had two cabooses.

These were the days of massive tonnage and the CNR had a profitable branch line on its hands. After the steam era on our railway ended in the fall of 1958 the grain extras were still double headers with two diesel locomotives at the head. The controls of the second engine were operated by means of an umbilical cord connected to the lead engine. This required only one engineer, the cab of the second locomotive being unoccupied, a saving in labour costs. With the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, the grain was carried on ships from Port Arthur/Fort William directly to Montreal, bypassing the grain elevators of Georgian Bay and eliminating the need for the grain extra trains that had been such a common sight.

The railway field had a creek running through it—we called it the CNR creek—much of it now underground. An account in the history book *Reflections* by Seward Herrington says that the creek was dammed up by the railway and the several foot depth of water that collected behind the boards was pumped up into the wooden water tower that stood east of the tracks to feed the standpipe near the main track just south of the station. I well remember seeing this water tower (34,000

gallon capacity) in the winter in the early 1950's when it had giant icicles hanging from it because of multiple leaks. The water tower, well past its best before date, was taken down and the stand pipe was connected to the town water supply by at least 1954. When I used to explore the former site of the water tower in the later 1950's there were still concrete footings in place for the legs of the water tower structure and pipes and valves in the grass.

Across Huron St. a siding branched off the main track into the Shipyard Machine Shop and, farther along, a siding went into the Shipyard Boiler Shop while another ran behind Smart's Cannery and National Grocers continuing across Pine St. to Girdwoods' Coal Sheds. Between Pine and Maple Streets a siding served the Dominion Engineers Supply Co. (Shell Oil Dealers) and MacDonald Lumber. Farther along behind First St., between Maple and Beech Streets there was another Shipyard siding to bring steel into the Steel Stockyard for the main shipbuilding berth at the foot of Hurontario St. A few blocks from there was Lake Junction where the tracks to Hamilton via Beeton veered off to the south to cross First St./Highway 26 at Shipley's Flour Mill (now Kelsey's) heading to Nottawa, Duntroon, Glen Huron and Creemore on their way to a junction near Beeton with the main line to Hamilton. In this area a siding served the flour mill while a second siding served an oil facility between First and Second Streets. Readers can

learn more about the twilight of the railway between Collingwood and Hamilton in my story *Death Knell on the Hamilton and North Western Railway* (August 2017). The full history of this line is found in Charles Cooper's monumental book *Hamilton's Other Railway*, a "must read" for anyone interested in Collingwood's railway history.

The last sidings within Collingwood at the time in question were at Harold Nixon's Imperial Oil Tank Farm north of Georgian China on Highway 26 (Balsam St.) Petroleum products were unloaded from Imperial Oil Tankers in the harbour at the oil dock and pumped through a pipeline to three huge storage tanks at Nixon's facility where they were transferred to railway tank cars as well as local trucks. Railway tank cars for gasoline, diesel and heating oil in that era were a fraction of the size of the enormous black tankers in use today for hauling oil. The tracks continued on from Esso to Kaufman's Furniture Factory (lumber in/finished furniture out) where there were two sidings.

It can be seen from the foregoing list of businesses served by railway sidings in Collingwood that some of the main freight items in those days (other than items dropped off at the freight sheds) were hopper cars of coal, tank cars of petroleum products for five different dealers, lumber/building supplies for lumber yards and furniture making, massive loads of steel and

other heavy components such as enormous diesel engines for shipbuilding, carload shipments of food, and the massive haulage of grain to export market.

By the mid-1950's as more people turned to cars, the passenger trains through Collingwood were carrying fewer people and the year 1955 was a year of "the last run" for four of our local passenger trains. There had long been a 7:00 p.m. Sunday evening train from Meaford to Allandale, connecting there with a train to Toronto. This train had special significance for my parents who were married at 6:00 p.m. on a very snowy Sunday, December 14, 1941. After the ceremony at First Presbyterian Church they made their way to the CNR Station to catch the evening train to go to Toronto on their honeymoon. When it was announced that this train would make its last run on Sunday, April 24, 1955 we went to the station to see it arrive. I still have a mental image of the locomotive (a Pacific 4-6-2 passenger locomotive with 69-inch driving wheels) whistling and coming around the curve by the Shipyard Main Office at the Huron St. crossing as it glided up to the station platform for the last time.

At the same time that the Sunday evening train from Meaford was cancelled, two other trains (the evening train from Allandale to Meaford and the morning train from Meaford to

Allandale) were also cancelled and their whistles likewise faded into the mists of time.

The fourth “last run” took place six months later on Saturday, October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1955 on the other branchline of the CNR coming into Collingwood when the “Hog Special” mixed train (passenger & freight) made its last run from Collingwood down Walnut St. on its way to Beeton where it connected with the main line to Hamilton. (For another five years, the overgrown tracks were used for occasional freight service to Glen Huron and Creemore and then in 1960 the tracks were lifted.) The CNR used some its oldest equipment for this run—ancient locomotives pulling ancient passenger and baggage/mail coaches on ancient minimally-maintained light rails at the reckless speed of 20 miles per hour. Often the train consisted of just the locomotive and its tender plus the steel baggage car and a wooden passenger car but sometimes it arrived in Collingwood with an assortment of freight cars that were picked up at stations along the way. The freight cars justified the “mixed” appellation of this train but often it was just a passenger train with hardly any passengers until someone at the CNR decided it wasn’t needed anymore. As will be seen below, carrying the mail helped to keep branch line passenger trains operating even when they carried few passengers. The Hog Special stopped carrying the mail in 1951.

Charles Cooper, in his book *Hamilton's Other Railway*, the history of the Hamilton & North Western Railway, described the branch line and its mixed train from Beeton to Collingwood this way: *Of all the affection that is lavished on railways anywhere, there is never so much bestowed as on a sleepy country branch line; overgrown with weeds, its stops ramshackle, its timetable lackadaisical and its equipment out of the ark...It was perhaps a miracle, or an accident of oversight, that the "Hog Special" survived as long as it did"* (pages 193-194). In a way, this description is somewhat reminiscent of the *Hooterville Cannonball* train on the TV show *Petticoat Junction*—a branch line of the fictional "C. & F. W. Railroad" long-disconnected from the main line (for 20 years because a trestle was demolished and never replaced) and forgotten about by the executives at the head office but still operating anyway because no one told them to stop. To say that the Cannonball's timetable was lackadaisical is quite an understatement—they haven't used a timetable in 20 years—when you consider that Charlie and Floyd who run the ancient wood-burning locomotive and its lone combination baggage and passenger coach stop at Morgan Creek trestle to fish and sometimes stop at Ben Miller's orchard to pick apples for baking pies. The very first episode of *Petticoat Junction* aired on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1963 and can be seen on YouTube—it's

good for a laugh and for experiencing the informality and ambience of an, albeit fictional, sleepy country branch line.

Speaking of old railway rolling stock, in 1953 the CNR Museum train paid a visit to Collingwood with an assortment of very old locomotives and passenger coaches which were open for tours.

The demise of several passenger trains by the mid 1950's left Collingwood with just the Hamilton-Allandale-Meaford-Allandale-Hamilton afternoon passenger train which had its last run on Saturday, July 2, 1960. It was on this train that, for a number of years when I was small, for my birthday in November, my parents would buy me a one-way ticket to Meaford and they would then drive to the end of the line to pick me up. As the train passed Lake Junction where the tracks of the old Hamilton & North Western arrived in town, I could see the Hog Special waiting for my train to pass by before the switch was turned to allow the Beeton train to take the main line into the St. Paul St. Station. My father clocked my train at 40 mph between Thornbury and Meaford where the track ran parallel to Highway 26. This run utilised the Hamilton-based D-1 diesel train set introduced in January 1952. It was a redesigned self-propelled unit from the 1930's somewhat similar in concept to the Budd Rail Diesel Cars or "Dayliners" of later years, and consisted of a combination diesel power unit/baggage and express car and two more coaches, one of



them containing the Railway Post Office. When it was broken down, which seemed to be frequently, a steam locomotive took over. In 1958 when the D-1 was sent to northern Ontario, either a steam locomotive (the steam era ended in the fall of 1958) or another diesel contraption #15832, a cousin to D-1, left over from the 1930's, took over for a time. The final run was powered by General Motors SW1200 diesel road switcher #1321.

In a little more than five years starting in April 1955, Collingwood went from six passenger trains on weekdays plus a Sunday evening train to no passenger trains at all in July 1960:

Evening train No. 63 from Allendale to Meaford: 9:20 p.m.  
Daily except Sunday

Morning train No. 60 from Meaford to Allendale: 6:50 a.m.  
Daily except Sunday & Monday

Afternoon train No. 61 from Allendale to Meaford: 12:52 p.m.  
Daily except Sunday

Afternoon train No. 62 from Meaford to Allendale: 3:04 p.m.  
Daily except Sunday

Mixed train No. 391 from Beeton to Collingwood: 12:45 p.m.  
Daily except Sunday

Mixed train No. 394 from Collingwood to Beeton: 1:45 p.m.  
Daily except Sunday

Sunday evening train No. 160 from Meaford to Allendale: 7:05 p.m.

Regularly scheduled passenger train service was now gone forever. Nevertheless, a few *special* passenger trains came to Collingwood in the next nineteen years. The first was the “Black Knights Special”, named for the Royal Black Knights of Ireland, which brought 1200 to 1300 people to town from Toronto for “Derry Day” on Saturday, August 11th, 1962 for a parade and celebration commemorating the Relief of the Siege of the city of Derry /Londonderry (Northern Ireland) in 1689. In all, 20,000 people were expected from Orange Lodges over a wide area of Ontario. This train with two large diesel locomotives and ten coaches caused quite some excitement at the railyard. I went down to my old site at the Hume St. crossing to watch the train leave town late in the day. When those two diesel engines roared to life in the railyard, they belched black smoke as though they were burning coal, reminiscent of the double header grain extras hauled by steam locomotives and by the time they crossed Hume St. the train was galloping south on its way back to Toronto.

In negotiations held in 1962 the Chamber of Commerce was able to persuade the CNR to run special weekend ski trains to Craigeith, the first of which arrived in town in January 1963. Due to cooperation by the weather, the ski train was a success

for the railway that year, the following year was not a success and the venture ended. The CNR had earlier successfully operated weekend ski trains from Union Station in downtown Toronto to Craighleith Station in the 1940's and early 1950's but with the opening of Highway 400 in 1952 and the post-war proliferation of new cars, the trains could not compete.

In 1979 a massive CNR "Mountain" class locomotive built in 1944, #6060 nicknamed "Bullet Nosed Betty" because of the shape of the front of its boiler with the headlight in the centre, operated a rail fan trip from Toronto to Collingwood and return on behalf of the Upper Canada Railway Society to commemorate the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of rail service started by the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway (i. e. the line was built into town in 1854 but didn't officially "open" until Jan. 1, 1855) and the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the arrival of the Hamilton & North Western Railway in town in 1879. After the steam locomotive was cut off to be serviced in Collingwood, two diesel engines (one at each end of a cut of several passenger coaches) operated two or three excursions from Collingwood to Stayner and back before the entire train was reassembled, Bullet Nosed Betty was turned on the turntable, and all headed back to Toronto.

Collingwood's first railway station was of wood and faced Huron St. Three sets of tracks came right through the building

and continued north across Huron St. toward the harbour freight shed and the first wooden grain elevator. Considering the wooden station's vulnerability to fire and that the early locomotives passing through it burned wood and produced sparks, it is remarkable that it lasted until 1873 when it burned down. The second station was built on the site of the present Museum that same year. That building had a fire in 1932 in the aftermath of which, during the repairs, its distinctive Victorian tower was cut down to roof level and the canopies at the north and south end of the building were not replaced, resulting in the station as we knew it until the CNR closed it and sold it to the Town of Collingwood in 1965.

I loved sitting in the station waiting room soaking up the ambience—it was a marvelous link with the past with the aroma of old wooden benches and the sound of hand-wound clocks ticking, the chatter of the Morse key and after the telegraph was history, there was the sound of the newer telecommunications equipment in Jim Belcher's office. Just think of the tens of thousands of people who arrived and departed on the trains from this place, the tearful goodbyes and the happy reunions, the tens of thousands of telegrams that were sent and received containing both good news and bad, and the countless tons of mail and express packages that were handled here for so many decades. The CNR station was truly "action central" in Collingwood. In my home office I have

a large early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ansonia “Regulator” wall clock (time only—it doesn’t strike the hour) of the type that used to hang in public buildings. On the glass of the door in front of the pendulum I have placed a Canadian National Railways emblem with the words in yellow on a black background over the red maple leaf as a reminder of what a special place the railway station was. As the clock ticks away the months and years, it recreates the sound of a bygone era.

The railways had contracts to carry the Royal Mail since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century because rail transport of the mail was efficient and fast when there was nothing else to compare it to. On branch line passenger trains there was a compartment in the baggage car or in one of the coaches designated as a RPO—Railway Post Office. Mail was picked up and dropped off at railway stations in huge canvas bags and while the train was in transit, post office employees sorted it and cancelled the stamps with a special postmark. At Camperdown, between Craigleith and Thornbury there was a mailcatcher post beside the track where the daily passenger trains could pick up, without stopping (nevertheless they had to slow down), a bag of outgoing mail hung there by a contractor. If there was mail to be dropped off at the same spot, a bag would be dumped off the moving train for a mail contractor to pick up. It was these profitable contracts to carry mail that kept branch line

passenger trains in business even when the number of passengers was constantly shrinking in the post-war era.

With multiple passenger trains a day over a century ago, someone could mail a letter to Toronto from Collingwood in the morning, the letter would be delivered later in Toronto, the reply would go north on a later train and be received in Collingwood in the evening of the same day or the next morning. This was the 19<sup>th</sup> Century equivalent of email. Keep in mind that home delivery of mail in Collingwood did not begin until 1950; during the period in question, citizens picked up their mail at the Post Office. As the mail-carrying contracts with the railways expired and the switch was made to moving mail by trucks and air, the Railway Post Office became a thing of the past as did the branch line passenger trains and a long-familiar way of life that, thankfully, is preserved in text and photos for current and future generations to see and enjoy in the books by Ian Wilson, Charles Cooper and Rick Leswick, mentioned above.

Once passenger train service ended, the Collingwood railway station was not as busy as it used to be and by 1964 the express department moved over to the freight shed at the corner of St. Paul and Simcoe Streets. A year later the Town purchased the old station for use as a museum to replace the loss of the space that the Huron Institute occupied on the lower floor of the

Carnegie Library that was destroyed by fire in 1963. Eventually it was discovered that the 1932 fire had structurally damaged the old station rendering it unsafe and it was demolished in 1997. Since 1998 the Collingwood Museum now occupies a modern replica of the 1873 Northern Railway/Grand Trunk/CNR station—a fitting tribute to the railway era and a fitting place to preserve the town’s past in a spot where it all began in the 1850’s.

The last run of a steam engine to Collingwood was in the fall of 1958 but the railway was still busy with freight using diesel locomotives. During this period I used to hang around the rail yard on Saturdays during the school year and daily in the summer holidays and I was befriended by Tom Elliot, a brakeman on the daily way freight. The crew took me around town in the cab of the locomotive as they dropped off and picked up freight cars here and there. On two occasions they took me with them all the way to Meaford and back, once in the locomotive cab, the other time I rode both directions in the caboose. In 1959 they told me they would take me to Glen Huron “if they ever went there again” but this was not to be because in 1960 the rail line to Glen Huron and Creemore was abandoned. This is an indication of just how informal branch line railroading was in those days. I don’t see how an eleven-year old school boy could have such adventures on a freight

train today with all the liability issues that now seem to come at us from every direction.

The railway era in Collingwood is all in the past with the rails torn up back to the town limits at the Poplar Sideroad. The tracks between there and Utopia are rusty, the ties are rotten and in many places young trees grow between the rails as nature takes over the ground that the railway builders laboured on to clear and lay track on 165 years ago. It is very fitting that the Collingwood District Historical Society holds its monthly meetings at the Leisure Time Club located on the former railway grounds—a direct link with Collingwood’s original reason for existence—the railway which began the town’s fascinating history.

***David Vuckson, a lifelong rail fan, is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O’Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.***