**Rails to Dorval**

**By Douglas N W Smith**

**The First Rail Line**

When the GTR Montreal-Toronto main line was built, the survey ran north of most of the settlements along the St Lawrence and Lake Ontario. This expedient allowed the railway to save the high cost of expropriations that would have been incurred if it ran through settlements. The GTR main line ran north of downtown Lachine and passed north of Dorval on an alignment roughly where Highway 20 is today.

The grading of the GTR line on the Island of Montreal began in 1854 and the rails were laid in 1855. Regular service began in November 1855 with a single round trip between Montreal and Brockville. The closest stop to Dorval with a station was Pointe-Claire; no trains would stop at Dorval for many years.

**Start of Commuter Traffic**

By the early 1870s, the elite and professional classes were moving to the Lakeshore communities during the summer months to escape the heat, dirt, noise and health problems of summer. To serve this market, the GTR introduced a 'suburban train' that ran between Montreal and Vaudreuil departing Montreal at 18:15 and returning to Montreal at 09:00. The hours were purely for executives. Dorval was initially not a stop, but was added sometime during this decade.

The reason it took the GTR some 20 years to begin stopping trains at Dorval was the distance of Dorval village, located on the shore of Lac St. Louis from the rail line. Other points, such as Pointe Claire, Sainte- Anne-de-Bellevue and Vaudreuil, developed more quickly as the railway was much closer to the community and the water. Nearby, Valois, which did not exist when the GTR built its line, was the second busiest stop on the line after Lachine in 1889 because of its proximity to the railway.

**Double Tracking and Dorval's First Station**

The GTR absorbed what had been Montreal's first railway, the Montreal and Lachine (M&L), in 1872. This purchase assumed great importance in 1888 when the GTR used it as part of a scheme to double track the Montreal - Toronto main line to meet rising traffic needs.

In 1888, approximately three miles of new track were laid from the old M&L junction to Lachine Wharf and to the original GTR main line near Dorval. The original GTR line was used by trains running eastward, while the new route through Lachine was used by westbound trains. As Dorval would now be a junction point, the GTR built a two-story station there. It included living quarters for the operator who controlled the signals and provided instructions to the train crews passing the junction. It was in this manner that GTR's ambitious plan to double track the Montreal-Toronto main line was completed between Montreal and Dorval.

**Competition for Commuters**

From the 1880's, Dorval grew as a village and then as a town. The arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1887 initially provided limited competition to the GTR suburban trains. Firstly, the CPR service at its Dorval station, which was built in either 1887 or 1888, consisted only of two through Montreal - Toronto trains daily whose schedules did not align with typical commuter hours. Secondly, the Montreal terminus on Dalhousie Square in the east end of Montreal near the harbour involved a circuitous and time-consuming trip around Mount Royal.

This changed on February 4, 1889 when the CPR opened its new Windsor Station at the west end of the city centre. Initially the pair of Montreal-Toronto trains shifted to this new route. When the summer suburban schedule was unveiled on May 20, 1889, the CPR outdid the GTR by offering an unprecedented three commuter trains between Montreal and Vaudreuil leaving at 12:30, 17:15 and 18:15 Monday through Friday. Thereafter the race was on and by the turn of the century both railways were providing year-round commuter service, though the schedules were always trimmed back after the summer season. To cope with rising freight and passenger traffic the CPR double tracked its line through Dorval in December 1899.

**Special Engines**

Both railways developed specialized locomotives to handle their suburban trains. The GTR shops turned out 10 small tank locomotives in 1883. Tank engines had the water tanks along the boiler and were designed to operate in either direction without turning, eliminating the need for turntables at either end of the run. With the growth of suburban traffic, the company shops turned out five larger tank engines to pull longer trains in 1892. The last batch of tank locomotives which had almost three times the pulling power of the old tank engines were delivered by the Montreal Locomotive works in 1914. The need for these engines arose from the delivery of new commuter cars with steel underframes and vestibules to increase safety. These new suburban cars weighed 138,000 pounds versus 75,000 for the old all wood cars they replaced. As well, increased traffic meant that the GTR planned to increase train size from five to seven cars. For its Lakeshore service, the CPR built a single small tank locomotive in 1893 and three larger ones in 1910.

**Post World War II Changes**

The CPR operated wooden passenger cars on all its Lakeshore trains until 1953 when it acquired 40 light weight all steel cars from Canadian Car and Foundry. They were numbered in the 800 series. The old acetylene gas lighting and wicker seats were replaced by electric lights and leather seats.

Postwar economics of the commuter trains deteriorated as many former off-peak hour users turned to cars or buses to travel into the city. Both the CPR and CNR operated the service at a loss, and as the two railways paralleled each other from Dorval to Vaudreuil, applications were made to the Board of Railway Commissioners in Ottawa for permission for the CNR to eliminate all commuter service from Dorval west. As the CNR handled only 20% of the commuter traffic from the West Island, its commuter service was the weakest of the two.

In April 1955, the CNR ended service west of Dorval. Diesels replaced the long-serving tank engines on the CNR commuter run in 1959. The steam engines continued to appear in diminishing numbers on the CPR commuter trains into 1960 where they ended the steam era on the CPR.

CN laid plans to build a massive new freight yard off Côte-de-Liesse Road on the West Island. To improve access to the new yard, the CNR planned to return to the original GTR alignment and eliminate the 1888 line between Lachine and Dorval as part of a scheme to reduce level crossings in Lachine. These plans meant the end of the CNR Dorval - Montreal commuter run, which terminated in June 1960.

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This left the old GTR station with no passenger trains as CNR inter-city services did not stop at Dorval but halted at Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue. The rapidly growing traffic to Dorval airport attracted the CNR passenger department's attention. Even before the last commuter train operated, the CNR announced that some intercity trains would begin stopping at Dorval in the fall of 1960 when trackwork associated with the new Taschereau freight yard was expected to be completed.

This work included relocating the CPR main line from Dorval to Grovehill about 200 feet to the north to clear space for the new CNR main line as Highway 20 had occupied part of the original GTR alignment. This work was not completed until June 1961 when the CNR trains ceased to operate through Lachine.

The Dorval stop continues to be popular. It consistently ranks in the top ten stations on the VIA system, with all of VIA's Montreal-Ottawa and Montreal-Toronto trains stopping at this station today. The Dorval stop proved to be very a popular part of CN's re-energized passenger marketing program which included the famous Montreal - Toronto Rapido trains. The old GTR station no longer was adequate for the surging passenger traffic and did not fit the new image that CN wished to promote. On July 11, 1967, in the midst of Centennial celebrations, Mayor Sarto Desnoyers of Dorval officially opened the new CN station. The modern building was of concrete and brick construction with huge glass walls. Trendy fibreglass benches seating 100 lined the waiting room which was air-conditioned (then a relative rarity in railway stations).

As for the commuter service, the CPR's purchase of nine push-pull bi-level commuter cars marked its last capital investment in this service. Faced with increasing losses, the CPR threatened to abandon the service. On October 1, 1982 the service was taken over by the Government of Quebec. The service has been operated by a number of government transit agencies since then. Today it is run by exo continuing a commuter rail tradition that goes back almost 150 years.

Dorval occupies a unique position with the transcontinental lines of both the CNR and CPR running

side by through its corporate limits. These major freight arteries today are carrying more domestic and

international freight than ever before and are a critical part of the nation's transportation infrastructure.

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