

Railway Coastal Museum History e-Bulletin: Volume XVI

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“One of the Best Restaurants Anywhere”: Dinner on the Diner

For most visitors to the Railway Coastal Museum, the most memorable display is the train car on the platform. The old car, sliced in half and restored to the 1940's era, provides a look backward to a time when the train in Newfoundland was more than simply a means to get from one place to another.

From the soldier of the Royal Artillery, home on leave from North Africa, to the mailman in his Royal Mail hat sorting envelopes destined for homes in every corner of Newfoundland and Labrador, the scenes of life on the train tell stories of adventure, of long journeys home, and of dressing in your best for dinner in the dining car of the Express.

From the very beginning, the Railway provided excellent food services to its passengers. Served with silver cutlery and on pristine white linen, the menu on the Newfoundland Railway was usually simple but elegant.

A menu from 1905 contains selections such as mock turtle soup, fresh fish, mutton chops and sirloin steaks, as well as potatoes,

oatmeal, sardines, and of course bread and tea. Cigarettes could be had for 20 cents a pack, and a Bass Ale for a

quarter. A glass of Scotch would cost you 30 cents. Some of the freshest possible ingredients were used at this time, with fish and game being purchased from people along the track as the train moved across the island.

The first trans-island trip in 1898 took over 24 hours, a figure which would only diminish slightly in the century to follow. With the trip taking so long, passenger comfort was a priority, and the chance to get a good meal went far to make the long journey more enjoyable.

By the CN era of the 1960's, the trip across the island still took almost a full day to complete from start to finish. Although the passenger service had declined by then and the menu had declined accordingly, passengers still had choices of bread, soup, meats and fish. Tea and coffee were still staples, but alcoholic beverages had disappeared from the menu. Cigarettes and cigars were still available, but the price of a pack of smokes was now 60 cents.



Newfoundland Railway Dining Car - the kitchen was located in the rear of the car (with the smaller windows), while the dining area was in front.

Despite the shrinking volume of passengers, the dining car in the 1950's and 60's was still an exquisite place to eat, and Ray Guy called the dining service on the Railway "one of the best restaurants anywhere." The dining car staff - consisting of 3 waiters, a chief steward, 2 cooks, a pantryman and a newsie (who sold coffee and sandwiches) still served the meals on white linen, and people still dressed in their best to eat in the dining car.

Charlie Chaytor worked on the dining car in the 50's and 60's, and he remembers the menu well. "The food all came from the stores in St. John's," he recalls. "We served bacon, eggs, and pancakes for breakfast, and salmon, turkey, and roast pork for supper. Big pots of soup were made in St. John's and placed

aboard the dining car before a trip. There would be chops and steaks, cold plates. The menu would vary day by day." Strawberries and ice cream were a favourite dessert, and the pie shop in St. John's was always busy.

For decades, dinner in the diner was one of the special treats that railway passengers looked forward to, a pleasant distraction in a long journey. But the passenger train service, always plagued with revenue problems, was finally discontinued in 1969. For thousands of Newfoundland travelers, the Railway was replaced by the Trans Canada Highway, and the elegant linen tableclothes of the dining car were replaced by the paper placemats of gas station restaurants.



Interior of the Dining Car on the last run of the passenger train, 1969.

Do You Have a Story About Dinner in the Diner on the Newfoundland Railway?

We'd Love to Hear it!

Send Your Story to the Railway Coastal Museum!

We Appreciate any Feedback or Questions You May Have.

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