

Railway Coastal Museum e-Bulletin

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Keith Collier

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60 Years of Confederation

British North America Act 1949 (1949 c.22 12, 13 and 14 Geo 6)

31. *At the date of Union, or as soon thereafter as practicable, Canada will take over the following services and will as from the date of Union relieve the Province of Newfoundland of the public costs incurred in respect of each service taken over, namely,*

(a) *the Newfoundland Railway, including steamship and other marine services;*

32. — (1) *Canada will maintain in accordance with the traffic offering a freight and passenger steamship service between North Sydney and Port aux Basques....*

33. *The following public works and property of Newfoundland shall become the property of Canada when the service concerned is taken over by Canada, subject to any trusts existing in respect thereof, and to any interest other than that of Newfoundland in the same, namely,*

(a) *the Newfoundland Railway, including rights of way, wharves, drydocks, and other real property, rolling stock, equipment, ships, and other personal property;*

<http://www.statutelaw.gov.uk/content.aspx?activeTextDocId=1095791>

This month marks the 60th anniversary of Confederation, and the event has been well marked in local media. But this is an important anniversary for the Newfoundland Railway and Coastal Services as well. Subject to the relevant clauses in the Terms of Union (above), on March 31, 1949, the Railway and Coastal Boats became just one part of the much larger Canadian National rail system. “Immediately before the expiration of March 31, 1949” (a phrasing rumoured to be chosen to avoid our joining Canada on April Fool’s Day) the Newfoundland Railway ceased to exist. Although physically, the same tracks and engines were there and the same employees reported for work, there is little doubt that April 1 was an important turning point in the history of transportation in Newfoundland and Labrador.



CN immediately began to bring the operations of the Newfoundland Railway in line with the rest of its railways. While this meant sudden changes to procedures, operating rules and maintenance that no doubt caused headaches for the Newfoundland employees, it also brought an immediate raise in pay to CN rates. A short strike in the summer of 1950 brought about better working hours and yet more increases in pay, and according to A. R. Penney and Fabian Kennedy, "Newfoundland railwaymen ... began to get a better idea of some of the benefits and costs of belonging to a larger national system." Also with Confederation came increased freight and passenger traffic between Newfoundland and Canada. CN quickly found it necessary to upgrade their facilities, the most noticeable aspect of which was the replacement of steam locomotives with diesel engines.

Although the early integration of the Newfoundland Railway into the CN system may have seemed promising, in hindsight it can be seen as the first step towards the abandonment of the railway and the shift to road transportation in Newfoundland and Labrador. While it is impossible to be certain of how history would have unfolded had the Newfoundland Railway remained under Newfoundland's direct control, it is easy to speculate. It is doubtful that the Railway would have survived in the face of road and truck competition no matter what the case, but the exact timing of the changeover and the form that transportation in Newfoundland and Labrador has taken today could well have been different.



One of the last timetables of the Newfoundland Railway. It was also the last timetable under the supervision of General Manager H. J. Russell, who passed away on February 26, 1949.

Do you have a story about the Newfoundland Railway?

We'd love to hear it!

We appreciate any comments, questions, or feedback you may have.

kcollier@railwaycoastalmuseum.ca

(709) 724-5929 or toll-free 1-866-600-7245

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