

## **Travelling to Gull Lake: Carts Coaches and Trains**

When I was growing up, my brothers and I would rush up Scott Drive to the railway tracks when we heard the train whistle. We would wave at the conductor and he would always wave back, much to our delight. As this often happened in the morning it was not unusual to be in our P.J.s

There is no question that train travel was a significant factor in the history of the Summer Village of Gull Lake. When the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway arrived in Calgary in 1883, it brought a marked increase in traffic on the north-south stagecoach route from there to Edmonton. It wasn't long before the need for a railway on this route was significant and viable. The Calgary and Edmonton Railway Company started a line in 1890, and it was soon leased to the Canadian Pacific Railway. The line, which roughly followed the C. and E. Trail was finished in 1891. Travel between the cities was reduced to 12 hours instead of the 4 days it took by stage coach. This resulted in a flood of settlers in the Central Alberta region, including the Gull Lake area.

Before 1903, however, travel between Lacombe and Gull Lake was still limited to the use of wagons of various sorts. Both carts and passengers had to be sturdy as the roads were very rough with mud grooves in summer and snow banks in winter. In the years between 1903 and 1911 there was, at least, a stagecoach service from Lacombe to Bentley and then on to Forshee and Rimby. The coach carried passengers, mail, and freight and was pulled by a team of bay horses named Dolly and Pet. The round trip to Bentley took two days when there were no issues due to snow or rain which inevitably caused delay and much discomfort for passengers.

Though much needed, a rail line over this route was many years in the making as the project encountered a number of obstacles. In 1909, businessmen and farmers from Lacombe, Rimbey and Bentley incorporated the Lacombe and Blindman Valley Electric Railway. It was one of several railways chartered in the Lacombe area at the time but the only one to actually build a line. It wasn't until 1913, however, that funding for the project was granted by the province for grading 20 miles of rail bed at \$7000 per mile and many local farmers lent their own teams and labour to assist the construction. The station (shown below) was also built that year. It is now a museum, currently located in front of the Village Hall.



World War 1 resulted in an extreme shortage of labour and steel for track and the project was postponed until 1917 when unused track from other lines became available. The line to Bentley was completed on November 28 of that year.

The first rail vehicle used by the railroad was a British-built gas-electric self-propelled passenger car called the “doodle-bug” but this proved to be very unreliable, having a tendency to derail on curves and not suitable for Canadian winters.

A more reliable saddle tank engine with a permanently attached tender and a car that combined passenger and freight service was brought into service. This small engine (see below) was affectionately called the “Peanut” and the line was called the Peanut Line. The colourful crew were nicknamed “the Outlaws” as some of them were former employees of the C.P.R. and perhaps didn’t leave that organization on the best of terms.

In the twenties, Aspen Beach was a very popular summer destination due in part to the experience of riding on the “peanut”.



The provincial government took control of the line in 1918 and it was reorganized and renamed the Lacombe and North-Western Railway. The line was plagued with financial difficulties and was ultimately sold to Canadian Pacific Railways in 1928 for \$1,500.00. In 1931, the line was extended to the Calgary-Edmonton Line. Though the line is still in use, currently running on an as-needed basis, passenger service is no longer available having been discontinued in the late 50's. The train currently runs on an as-needed basis. That being said, you can still hear those train whistles almost every day.

References:

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