

The Next Spike

Michael Bourque

As the Railway Association of Canada celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2017—the same year Canada marks its sesquicentennial—it is reflecting on the rail industry’s place in our country’s history and, as RAC President and CEO Michael Bourque writes, taking stock of its contribution now and into the future.

In a debate in the House of Commons in 1881, Sir John A. Macdonald articulated his vision of Canada’s great future, built on the strength of its railways. “I know we can appeal to the patriotism of the people of Canada,” he said. “We can tell them that we want a line that will connect Halifax with the Pacific Ocean.”

By means of “one great Canadian line,” carrying as much traffic as possible north of the border, Canada would build up cities like Montreal, Quebec, Toronto, Halifax and St. John, he said. He acknowledged the enormous challenges and expenses posed by building over the Canadian Shield and through the Rocky, Selkirk and Coastal Mountains, but believed in connecting “the great counties composing the Dominion from sea to sea by one vast iron chain, which cannot and will never be broken.”

It’s incredible to look back on Sir John A.’s remarks and his foresight. He understood that the economic benefits to the lands in the immediate vicinity of the railway—the “prairie section,” for example—would far outweigh the \$25 million price tag for building the railway from coast to coast.

Less than five years later—at 9:22 a.m. on Nov. 7, 1885 in Craigellachie, B.C.—Donald Smith drove the Last Spike into the railway that

would connect Canada’s populated centres in the East to the relatively unpopulated West. This moment defined progress for Canada and stands as a symbol of a promise that the country would forever be linked by its railway network.

On Oct. 23, 2017, the Railway Association of Canada (RAC) will officially celebrate its 100th anniversary. As part of this celebration, we are reflecting on the rail industry’s contribution to the development of Canada throughout the past century, informing people about new in-

novations and technologies and, of course, imagining what the next 100 years will bring.

Our organization was established to ensure the efficient movement of troops and supplies during the First World War. Logistics wins wars, and the timely deployment of men and equipment by rail contributed to Canada’s capture of Vimy Ridge in 1917. Like the creation of Canada’s railway industry, this accomplishment is central to the collective understanding of our country and represents Canadian identity and unity.

Because the group—then called the Special Committee on War and National Defence—was so successful in advancing the interests of railways in Canada, it continued its work beyond the war and evolved into the association we are today.

A century after our organization was created, we continue to be a strong advocate for



Canadian railway workers build a railroad through captured territory during the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917. Photo: Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada

Canada's rail sector. Today, Canada depends on rail as a safe and efficient means of transporting goods and people. Robust investments in long-lasting, green infrastructure show that we are an innovative industry committed to service, sustainability and, most importantly, safety.

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Photo: RAC

Canada's freight rail sector is the backbone of our economy. Domestically, freight railways transport more than \$280 billion worth of goods a year in Canada alone. In support of Canada's trade agenda, our railways allow Canadian businesses to compete internationally by helping to deliver more than \$150 billion worth of exports to markets across North America and around the globe. In fact, close to two thirds of our traffic crosses a border or touches a port.

Canadian railways also offer a comfortable, affordable and environmentally friendly way to travel to close to 82 million passengers each year. An average commuter train, for example, takes 188 cars off the road. Ottawa's relatively small O-Train, operating over about 8 kilometres of track, alone moves 2.1 million passengers annually. A high percentage of these

travelers would be in cars if it were not for the availability of this service.

By shifting more goods and passengers to rail, the industry plays a key role in helping the environment by limiting harmful emissions and reducing road congestion. Despite moving millions of passengers and nearly 70 per cent of intercity freight each year, our railways produce just one per cent of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions—making rail one of our country's greenest transportation options. Rail is also extremely efficient. Canada's freight railways can move a tonne of goods more than 200 kilometres on just a single litre of fuel.

Our industry's sustainability into the future is intricately linked to our commitment to safety. Canadian railways are already among the safest in the world

and getting safer. However, rail accidents over the past few years, both in Canada and the U.S., have served to heighten concerns for rail safety and especially the transportation of dangerous goods.

In response, railways have focused on accident prevention, emergency preparedness and importantly, training. Efforts in these areas, coupled with significant investments in infrastructure and innovative technologies, enhance safety across the rail network. Capital investments made by Canada's privately owned and operated freight railways have resulted not only in record efficiencies, but also world-leading safety records. Even between 2007 and 2009, during the great recession, railways invested close to 20 per cent of their revenues back into their networks. These investments have resulted in signifi-

cantly lower accident rates. Between 2005 and 2015, Canada's freight rail accident rate fell by more than 36 per cent, and stands at 2.2 accidents per billion gross tonne-kilometres. Safety is our industry's top priority and we strive toward zero accidents.

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Canada's railways have also redoubled their efforts to prepare for and respond to rail incidents. Today, railways provide more than 660 Canadian communities with aggregate information about the dangerous goods that transit through their areas, to help first responders prepare and plan. And over the past five years, RAC and its members have trained close to 29,000 railway employees, industrial plant personnel and first responders on dangerous goods handling and emergency response.

If Sir John A. were alive today to celebrate Canada's 150th birthday he would witness the realization of his vision. We can only imagine what he and the rest of Canada's forefathers would think of our success in global trade. What would they think of Canadian railways carrying Wyo-



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ming coal and Saskatchewan potash to world markets, or intermodal service—goods travelling by ship from Asia to Vancouver and Prince Rupert, and onwards to Chicago and New Orleans on Canadian railways that also operate in the U.S.?

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and Canadians' love affair with train travel, as evidenced by the new commuter railways being built in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. VIA Rail's ambitious plan for high-frequency intercity service will further develop Canada's passion for rail transportation. No doubt Sir John A. would be delighted with the thousands of tourists who come to Canada to enjoy an unbeatable view of our vast and beautiful land from the train.

Railways are a proud part of Canada's history. One hundred and thirty-six years following Macdonald's speech in the House of Commons and 132 years after Donald Smith drove the Last Spike, Canada's railways operate around the clock, 365 days a year, driving the next spike for supply chain competitiveness, sustainability and safety. Our commitment to the environment, the economy and the communities through which we operate will continue as we look to play an even bigger role during the next 100 years. **P**

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