



Years of CONSTRUCTION

The Business Of Rail – Central Alberta's "National Dream"

by Doris J. MacKinnon

In detailed notes, which are now held by the Red Deer Archives, one of Red Deer's first historians, E.L. Meeres, wrote that "the applicants for the Alberta Central Rail are reported to be Toronto Capitalists with ample means and determination to push through to the mountains, where they have a vast enterprise afoot".

In fact, the romanticized version of a "national dream" that would forge one nation from "sea to sea," was more often linked to capitalist profits, colonization plans, and political aspirations. Indeed, long before the arrival of rail, capitalism fueled the enterprises of Métis freighters, who used Red River carts to earn as much as \$100 per day, hauling supplies from Calgary to Edmonton.

Eventually, industrial progress and political opportunism replaced the enterprises of freighters. Induced by federal grants and Reverend Leonard Gaetz's offer to relinquish half interest of his farm, the Calgary and Edmonton Railroad Company began construction in June of 1890, on a line that would link central Alberta to the larger cities. By November of that same year, the line had reached the new town site of Red Deer on Leonard's farmstead, and he and his wife were among the first passengers to travel on the train from Red Deer to Calgary. By July of 1891, the final portion of the line to Edmonton was complete, and by August, the Canadian Pacific Railway had taken over operations.

The new rail line led to a surge of activity, with the arrival of new settlers and the growth of business. Numerous government incentives of land grants encouraged many other rail companies to take advantage of the booming central Alberta economy. The Alberta Central Railway (ACR), a subsidiary of CPR, was chartered in 1901, ostensibly to run a line from the Coalbanks area to Rocky Mountain House. However, according to archivist Michael Dawe, "railroads were



John T. Monte, always used the promise of rail lines in his election campaigns. Further incentive for the ACR was the promise of a federal subsidy to the tune of \$4000 per mile for completion of the line from Red Deer to Rocky Mountain House.

The activity in central Alberta drew national attention, when Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier drove the first spike for the ACR on the South Hill near Gaetz Avenue. By this time, the Canadian National Railway had joined with German developers, who were interested in exploring the Brazeau coal fields west of Rocky Mountain House. Canadian National Western Railway (CNWR) quickly secured a provincial charter to extend their line from Stettler through the Red Deer district, and a fierce competition to reach the coal fields ensued. The companies soon became embroiled in court injunctions, while the workers often

engaged in physical confrontations, one of which was described in 1910 by the Advocate as a "riot."

The Canadian National Western Railway finally completed its line to the Brazeau coal fields in March of 1914, while the ACR, plagued by management and legal complications, had ceased operations in 1912, and handed its leases to CPR. The CPR entered into agreement with the CNWR to make joint use of the tracks and bridge near Rocky Mountain House. The wisdom of this merger soon became apparent, when the largest oil and gas fields in the British Empire were discovered at Turner Valley in 1914. The discovery of alternate sources of energy, along with the outbreak of war in Europe, quickly made the business of rail much less profitable.

Timeline CONSTRUCTION

- 1906: Jun 1 - Building permits were \$30,100.
- 1909: Sep 8 - Laid cornerstone of the Leonard Gaetz Memorial Methodist Church.
- 1910: Aug 10 - Sir Wilfrid Laurier drove the first spike of the Alberta Central Railway.
- 1910: Sep 9 - The Bank of Commerce started construction on their new building.
- 1911: Jan 25 - Real estate men had organized, appointing W.J. Botterill as president.
- 1912: Jan 16 - A new post office was to be built at a cost of \$100,000.
- 1912: Dec 6 - Bank of Montreal opened a branch on Gaetz Avenue.
- 1914: Aug 10 - Alberta Central subdivision of the CPR officially opened.
- 1914: Nov 8 - The public library opened.
- 1920: Nov 26 - The CNR completed their line into Red Deer and a station was built over the winter.
- 1928: Oct 4 - A.B. Mitchell opened a new jewellery store in the Snell-Dodds block.
- 1929: Apr 5 - Whyte Motors opened their new garage on Gaetz Avenue.
- 1929: Aug 1 - Safeway decided to build a store at Red Deer to open Dec 11th.
- 1930: A new airport was made at Penhold.
- 1930: Mar 10 - North West Motors opened a garage opposite the Advocate office.
- 1931: Mar 5 - Opening of the new Red Deer court house.
- 1936: Mar 11 - WE Lord and Company opened a new and modern General Motors garage on Gaetz Avenue.
- 1939: Jun 7 - 1939 was hailed as record building year for Red Deer with permits on hand totalling \$225,000.
- 1939: Oct 19 - John David Eaton officially opened the new Red Deer Eaton's store.
- 1939: Nov 17 - The Buffalo Hotel opened.
- 1947: Jan 8 - Building permits were over \$600,000 for the year. 100 homes were built compared to 24 the year before.
- 1950: Feb 28 - Construction began on the new federal building.
- 1950: Apr 19 - The new provincial building opened.
- 1951: Aug 15 - The new post office was officially opened.
- 1951: Sep 5 - Premier E.C. Manning opened