

Gander and the Railway

(by Robert G Pelley 2019-05-18)
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When one talks of transportation in Gander, Newfoundland, the image that almost invariably comes to mind is that of military or civilian aircraft. They may have been bombers parked wingtip to wingtip along the sides of the runways, waiting to fly across to England and become part of the mighty air armadas attacking Nazi Germany. Or perhaps it was PBN flying boats on Gander Lake, en route to Murmansk to help the Russia navy search for U-boats. It could have been commercial traffic, like the gracious tri-tail Constellations or huge Stratocruisers, based on the B-29s that dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan. Maybe they were rugged DC-4s on the ramp at the old terminal, in the still-existing Hangar 22. On the other hand, one might think rather of the modern jets and helicopters around the “new” Gander Terminal.

But none of this would have happened without the railroad. It was fine to have a lovely plateau in Newfoundland with no obstructions to flight. But first, you had to get to it with people, materials and equipment. Luckily the plateau was right next to the Newfoundland Railway line, around milepost 219. The quizzical, cranky, but faithful, “Newfy Bullet” could be counted on to get the job done. The Bullet was also sometimes called the Overland Limited or the Flyer.



Double engine “Bullet”, circa 1955

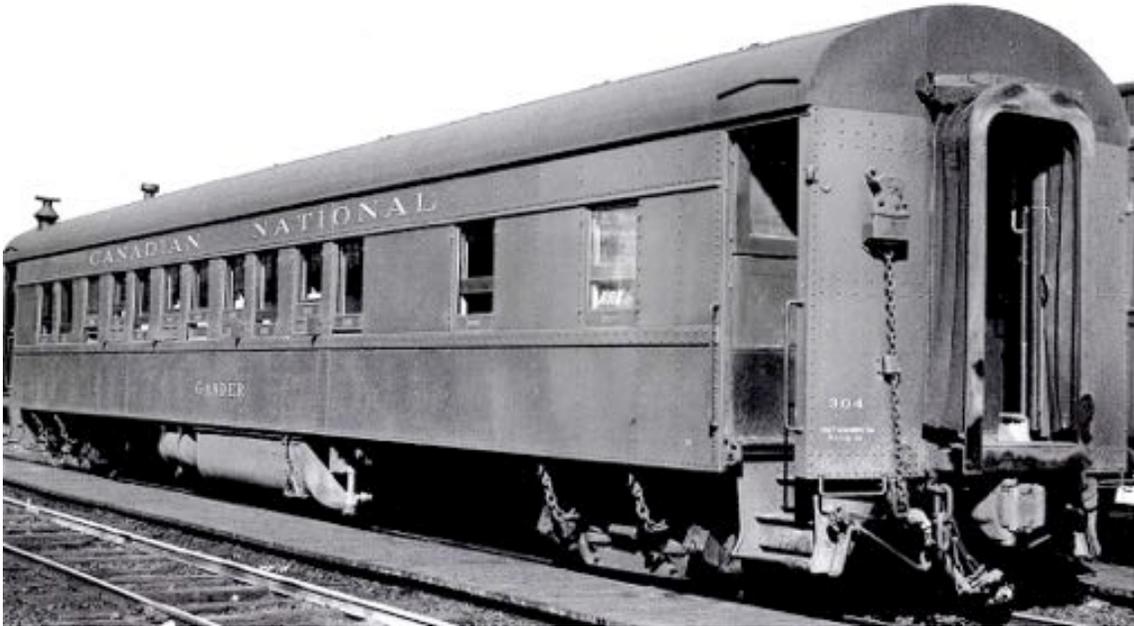
Getting to Gander had to be done in any weather, especially to deliver aircraft fuel from Lewisporte and supplies from Porte aux Basques. The train below is coming from the west, near what was then called the Gullies, about 500 metres east of where the present day Baird Street crosses the Trailway.



The next photo shows an Esso 5000-gallon tank car at their main fuel storage site on Well Road.



Gander Airport even had a passenger wagon, n° 304, named after it. The name is under the windows near the centre of the wagon.



Below is a well-known photo of early construction workers arriving in Gander 1937-38.



But the train was more than just a means of transportation. It was also used as Gander's first school, where a wagon had been converted to a classroom. At first

it did not serve only Gander but moved to other communities, notably Glenwood and possibly Lewisport, after spending one or two weeks in Gander, depending on the source of information. At one point the teacher was Jenny Noftel.

The train was also used as a temporary hotel, notably for the first Hudson bomber crews that crossed the Atlantic in November 1940, as shown below in another well-known photo.



The train was on a strict schedule and not always available when one needed to somewhere. There were no roads in and out of Gander in the early days, so a "car" of some sort was needed to go on the railway line. This was useful when Dr Knapp came in from Lewisporte on his weekly trip or when radio and weather personnel had to go to Botwood for a flying-boat visit. This contraption was owned by the RCAF and operated by Tom Hammond, who was given the rank of sergeant.



Tom Hammond and "The Bug"

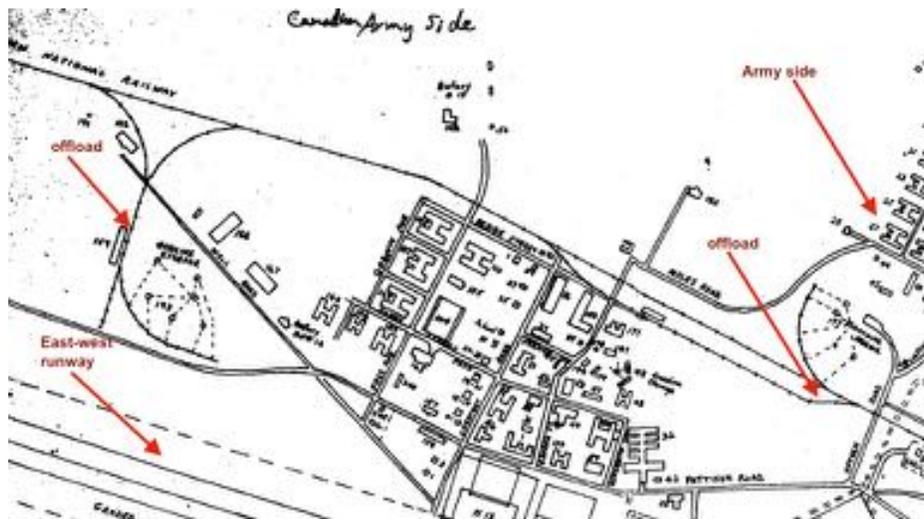
The railway roadbed was useful not only to lay tracks. It was also a “walking trail”. Joey Smallwood walked it quite extensively to go from village to village during his quest to convince Newfoundlanders to vote for Confederation. Men from the outports who had learned about the good construction jobs at the Newfoundland Airport thought nothing of walking in from towns like Glenwood, Norris Arm and Gambo and other places many miles away.

It was precious during war when telegraph lines had to be put in for example between Gander and the military airport in Torbay near St. John's. The railroad route furnished not only a convenient route to follow – it even had its built-in train system to deliver telegraph poles, wire, workers and even rocks to provide a proper foundation. Thanks to Keith Lacey, the following photo is a still frame from a US military movie.



After the war, people in Gander started in buying cars, though no one could really go very far. Going west was easier than going east as there was a rough road going to Glenwood, with a ferry across the Gander and Exploits Rivers, with a good route, in 1954, as far as St George, near Stephenville. Going east to Clarendville, which would have given access to the Bonavista and Avalon peninsula road networks, was however not possible.

In 1954, Canadian National Railways, which had taken over the Newfoundland Railway system in 1949, set up a car ferry, of basic flat cars, between Gander and Clarenville. Over time there were two off-load points in Gander.



A typical loaded train would be somewhat like the one shown below, with several passenger wagons and dining car attached. The cost per car one-way was 10\$.



But travel by train in those days was not without certain pleasures, one of which was comfortable seats and acres of legroom. Another was a dining car with real cutlery, as opposed to the terrorist-proofed, flimsy plastic of today.

Below are photos of a Newfoundland Railway solid silver sugar spoon, named and showing proof marks.



The railway station itself changed over time. It was originally called “Newfoundland Airport”. The Americans quite often called the place “Gander Field”. The name “Gander” was in generally accepted as the official name in mid 1941.

Below are several photos that show the evolution of the railway station over the years. The first station agent was Bert Stone.



First station



1953-4, with the freight shed on the right



Circa 1955, with a section added.



Circa 1957, all spruced up! (Diefenbaker election visit?)

The following were the business telephone numbers in the mid 1950s:

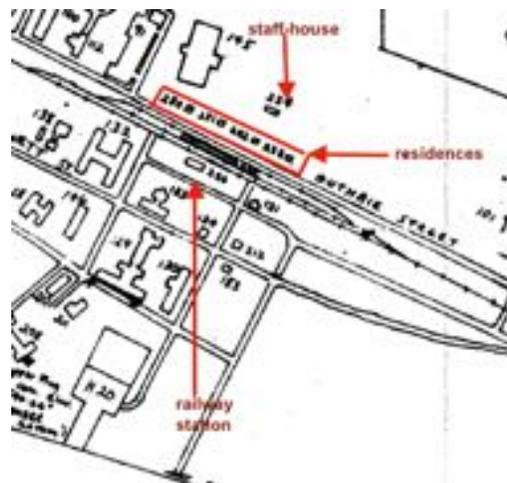
| CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS: | | |
|--------------------------------|-------|-----|
| General Office, McClure Street | | 645 |
| Freight Shed, Guthrie Street | | 321 |
| Roadmaster, Guthrie Street | | 432 |

But to operate a railway station and a freight shed and to monitor a certain part of the railway line, a competent staff was needed. The boss at Gander was for most, if not all, of the period was Clarence Lannon. Many of the staff lived just across the street in five small yellowish houses, each with a large kitchen, a dining area, three bedrooms – and running water, a luxury that many, on moving in from the outports, saw for the first time.

These houses were occupied by the families of Mr Lannon, James Pardy, Gordon Brazil, George Greening and Patrick Cashin. These houses can be seen in this photo, just north and across the road from the freight shed.



There was also a staff house for single men working for the CNR. Some wonderful card games were played in that building!



The photo below shows several members of CNR personnel in the mid-1950s:



Photo from the late Fred Smeaton

But the job “at the railway” meant more than just helping passengers and shipping parcels. For one, trains had to be checked for safety. The telegram below of 05 August 1948 refers to repair of air-brakes on tanks cars.

| O.C.S. TELEGRAM | | NEWFOUNDLAND RAILWAY | Form 490A |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| From | <i>Lander</i> | Received | OFFICE STAMP <i>Aug 5th/48</i> |
| To | <i>to Brazie</i> | Delivered | |
| <i>Found several air brakes not working on tank cars advisable to have car repairs go to Lunenburg today E Young</i> | | | |

There was also record keeping to be done. Below shows two accounting forms, which appear to be firstly a record of the “float” received at the start of the day and, secondly, a list of daily transactions.

As can be seen, these two forms are from April 1948.

Form 568

NEWFOUNDLAND RAILWAY

Station No. 129

Received the sum of 56831 dollars

From J. J. Leach

Agent at Gander Station

Account of his receipts Apr 18 1948

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| BILLS | 450 00 |
| CHEQUES | |
| GOLD | |
| SILVER | |
| COPPER | |
| TOTAL CASH | 450 00 |
| Total Vouchers | 118 31 |
| Grand Total | 568 31 |

Both sides of this form must be filled in by the Agent, and the name of the Station or Agent. Receipts in bills or silver will not be accepted. Cheques must be made payable to the Newfoundland Railway, or similar. When a credit is made in favour of the station, the name of the station must be given.

C. E. H. CASHIER

APR 18 1948

NEWFOUNDLAND RAILWAY

Station No. 129

For Credit of Gander Station

| Bill | Particulars of Receiptance | Amount |
|-------|----------------------------|--------|
| | BILLS | 450 00 |
| | CHEQUES | |
| | GOLD | |
| 45 | 45000 SILVER | |
| | COPPER | |
| | Total Cash | 450 00 |
| | Total Vou'rs | 118 31 |
| 45000 | Total Receiptance | 568 31 |
| | CNR Repair Order # 662585 | 58 05 |
| | Chgo Dept Justice | 17 00 |
| | | 13 10 |
| | | 13 10 |
| | Inst. Blk # 9152370 | 1 06 |
| | 67 | 92 |
| | 82 | 3 58 |
| | 85 | 1 06 |
| | 86 | 1 06 |
| | 90 | 66 |
| | 903 | 578 |
| | Ch/E H 916 | 287 |
| | | 11831 |

The movement of the trains along the tracks had to be constantly monitored to avoid accidents and collisions. The form below is addressed to train n° 51 and says that the next train ahead left Gander at 11h50 AM and arrived Notre Dame Junction at 1h50 PM. The signal (along the line) is for train n° 33 and does not affect n° 51. It appears to be signed by Benny Doyle.

Form A
NEWFOUNDLAND RAILWAY
CLEARANCE

Station Gander M. May 5 1948

Train No 51

I have orders 5-8 for your train.

The next train ahead is 1150 AM and arrived at Notre Dame Junction at 1 50 PM m. Signal is displayed for No 33 and does not now affect you.

Benny Doyle Operator.

This does not affect any train orders you may have received. Conductors and Engineers must each have a copy, and see that their train is correctly designated in the above form.

The train order n° 57 shown below is of a similar nature. In this case, Gander is warning that an extra train, n° 1010 will be running between Cobbs Camp and Glenwood after 4h30 PM on 07 August 1948. It is to be noted that time is given both in numbers and figures to avoid any confusion.

NEWFOUNDLAND RAILWAY

TRAIN ORDER No. 37 FORM 31
Revised 1948

To Extra 1010 west At Gander

To _____ At _____

X _____ Ofr. _____ M _____

*Work Extra 1005 protect
against Extra 1010
west between Cobbs
Camp and Glenwood
after 4:30 P.M. thirty
P.M.*

P. J. Dwyer

Conductor and Engineer must each have a copy of this order.

REPEATED AT 3:37 P.M.

| Conductor | Engineer | Dep. | Wade | Time | Operator |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| <i>[Signature]</i> | <i>[Signature]</i> | <i>[Signature]</i> | <i>[Signature]</i> | <i>[Signature]</i> | <i>[Signature]</i> |

But the arrival of a train was more than just a simple inscription in a timetable. It was quite often a social event, especially during the construction before and during war. The late Fred Chafe, a Gander pioneer, gives the following description :

Sundays made no difference to life in the camp as everybody worked all day, the only relaxation being the arrival of the Overland Limited about 7 p.m. during the summer when every man in camp appeared at the Station to have a look over the passengers and then to wait for Bert Stone, who was Station Agent and Postmaster to call out the mail. This was lovely on fine evenings but if the weather was bad it was pretty uncomfortable standing outside for probably half an hour waiting for your name to be called for a letter. After this, one went back to camp, climbed into the bunk and sat up and wrote your letters in reply.

Most people do not know is that the Salvation Army was a key support in very early Gander - and very visible. In a Gander with no roads to the outside, the train was important.....and the Salvation Army knew it! During summer, when the Saturday evening train came in, the Salvation Army Brass Band would march, from its Citadel on the north-west corner of the parade square on the Army side, down to the railway station. It would set up between the old Eaton's department store and the railway tracks and play for perhaps 40-50 minutes. It was always a welcome event not only for travellers but all of Gander. And because the railway station was next door to "Goodyear's Canteen", every Saturday evening was like a festival.

The photo below shows the Salvation Army brass near another Goodyear's store, this time near the former RCAF drill hall (which later became the Gander rink),



Though Gander had access to air travel and increasingly more roads, trains remained popular. Keith Lacey tells about when he went off to Memorial University, in September 1964: “I went by train. The train ticket was \$4. An Air Canada Vanguard to St John’s was \$11, so no way I was going by air. My father dropped me off at the station at midnight, I arrived in St. John's 24 hours later, with stops all along the way. “-

In 1968 CN introduced a “Roadcruiser” bus service, capable of getting passengers from Port aux Basques to St John’s, on the other side of the island, in fourteen hours. By now, air travel was no longer the domain of only the filthy rich and the cost was more reasonable to fly from Gander to St John’s or elsewhere on or of the island.

The railway could not compete with busses and planes. Even worse, Newfoundland being narrow gauge, trains from the mainland need to change bogeys. Near the end of the 1970s, surveys showed that from the mainland, deliveries took 20 days by train and six by truck. After the provincial Sullivan Commission, work was done to improve the railway system, but it didn’t last. The federal Minister of Transport in 1985 suggested closing the railway completely in return for funds to upgrade the road system.

It was no longer possible for a couple of people pull to out a guitar and an accordion and start up a party between Millar’s Junction and Alexander Bay

station. Poker games set up on a suitcase on peoples' knees in facing seats on the Bonavista Branch were now a thing of the past.

For Gander, this meant closing down operations. This is what it soon looked like by the mid-1990s - an abandoned building and the landing of a Russian Aeroflot jet which hardly uses Gander any more.



This phenomenon is called “progress”, for those who didn’t know.

But now, even the building is gone.