

How we got to Station Street

By Jody Didier

The Long Woods Purchase was completed on Nov. 20, 1822 when the chiefs of the Chippewa (many of whom preferred the designation Ojibwa) and the Mississauga peoples agreed to sell a tract of land for an annuity of 600 pounds in currency. This included much of the land north of Dungannon.

By 1855, James Cleak and Alfred Barker were settled on Hastings Road near Quarry (Marble) Lake. The first cedar log street was built in 1860 and James Cleak opened the first post office in 1861. Of course, you know, back then the town was called York River and the name was changed in 1879 by Senator Billa Flint. The village was incorporated in 1904 and it became a town in 1995. Lloyd Churchill was the first mayor of the newly formed Town of Bancroft.

The Bancroft municipal office at 24 Flint Street opened in 1962. As of the May 8, 2017, the town offices moved to the former Bancroft Train Station, sharing space with the Bancroft Mineral Museum. Located at 7 Hastings Heritage Way (off Station Street), the facility reflects the heritage and history of a town built around industries related to timber and minerals, which depended on the railway.

The local railway started in 1879 because of a backwoods mineral enterprise and was originally known as the Snowdon Branch Railway. It was re-incorporated as the Toronto & Nipissing Eastern Extension Railway in 1880. Henry S. Howland was the president and Charles J. Pusey was the vice-president.

It became the Irondale, Bancroft and Ottawa Railway in 1884, at which time a railway subsidy report mentioned that \$3,000 per mile or \$160,000 was being provided to the I.B.&O. planned to run from the Victoria branch of the Midland Railway to the Village of Bancroft, in the township of Dungannon, Hastings County. In 1886, the I.B.&O. acquired the 6.5 mile Myles Branch Tramway to Furnace Falls which had been built in 1880, on wooden rails. It opened to Irondale in 1887, to Wilberforce in 1893, to Baptiste in 1897, to Mud Creek (2.5 miles east of Baptiste) in 1898.

A December 1944 news piece entitled 'Ontario Railway Nightmare Line' aptly describes what happened to the I.B.&O. railway and why it never reached Ottawa. In fact, builder Charles Pusey's bankroll had thinned due to high construction costs and the limited know-how disappeared at York River, about three miles short of reaching Bancroft. Pusey sold off his steel and paid off the help-but he still had the charter for a railroad to Ottawa.

The article includes an interview with Frank Askey, a Bancroft old-timer, who had worked on the I.B.&O. railway as a \$1.25 a day construction hand. 'We had a lot of trouble in those days. Once we really had a rush job. That was the time we were supposed to have an engine standing at Gooderham by a certain day, if Pusey was to hold onto his charter. We built two sections of track and by playing leapfrog with those sections we managed to get an engine into Gooderham in time. The engine got there all right, but there were no tracks behind it for six miles and none in front. Pusey kept his charter.'

Pusey died in 1899 and by 1905, control passed to Zebulon A. Lash, a solicitor for the Canadian Northern Railway - a major creditor of I.B.&O. and Pusey, personally. In 1909 the line was acquired by Mackenzie, Mann and Co. for the newly created Ontario and Ottawa Railway. At the time, assets included 28 flat cars, baggage and passenger cars, three locomotives and two box cars. By 1910, the railway reached Bancroft.. The line was leased by the Central Ontario Railway which was later acquired by wholly by the Canadian Northern Railway in 1914. The CNoR merged with the Canadian National Railways system in 1922 to '24, extending the route. The first through train from Kinmount/Howland Junction to Bancroft ran on Sept. 12, 1910.

By 1944, the line was known as the only railroad in Canada that could operate with a calendar instead of a timetable. Apparently, the railway, which navigated a 55-mile stretch between Bancroft and Howland Junction was seldom less than three hours late. Askey said you could count on the train to leave Bancroft on the right day but he couldn't recall a single instance of when it left on time. According to article, which originally appeared in the *Peterborough Examiner*, railway engineers claim that no railway grade in the Canadian Rockies compared with the grade up Baptiste Hill, just west of Bancroft. It uses more than 3.5 feet for every 100 feet forward, having a 3.64 grade. Speed was held to 15 miles an hour and the turns so sharp that only two engines in the entire CNR system could make the corners. There was a scheduled stop at the top of Baptiste Hill, to take on water. Not for the engine or the passengers, but for members of the crew.

The last train ran the line in March of 1960. In 1975 the tracks were removed and today, the Hastings Heritage Trail follows the old railway line along the 156 kilometre corridor that linked Hastings County. A four-season, multi-use recreational trail, the Hastings Heritage Trail runs through Downtown Bancroft, past the old grain silos that have been converted to apartments, offices and shops and right in front of the town offices, the former railway station.