

# WORK THROUGH TIME

*Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea*



## The S&L Railway

Brian Campbell, with A.J.B. Johnston

The development of the Sydney and Louisburg Railway [sic], like the tracks it laid across the landscape, followed a winding course through Cape Breton's history. For well over half a century, the S&L Railway played a pivotal and memorable role in the life of the island. For seven decades the S&L supported and sustained the industries, businesses, and people of the northeastern corner of Cape Breton Island. Once it was among the most active freight lines in Canada, a fact that belied its nickname, the "Slow and Lazy." Its main responsibility – its principal achievement – was that it carried tens of thousands of tons of coal to their place of export. At the same time, it moved hundreds of industrial-area workers to and from their places of work. Along the way and over the years the S&L also touched the lives of thousands of ordinary Cape Bretoners. These were people who had little or nothing to do with coal or industry. Day-shoppers, berry-pickers, sight-seers, tourists, people on their way to dances or loved ones – all made use of the S&L. For 70 years the winding and weaving line of the S&L Railway was one of the threads of local society, helping to stitch together the communities it linked.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries railways came to be the dominant form of transportation on the North American continent. Cape Breton Island was not untouched by the phenomenon. Like so many Cape Breton enterprises, the first railways on the island owed their existence largely to coal. The S&L was no exception. To move the large quantity of coal that could be mined on Cape Breton there would have to be an efficient system of transportation. Essentially that meant railways and ships. At first, the rails were made of wood and horses provided the power. In time, steel rails replaced wooden ones and steam locomotives gave horsepower a whole new meaning. Soon it was clear that a network of railroads had to be built to connect the collieries to tidewater.

Work on the line from Norway Junction (Reserve) to Louisbourg began in 1874. With the completion of the rail line to Louisbourg and the construction of a shipping pier on the southeast side of the harbour at Havenside, the original S&L Railway cast a tall shadow over the ruins of the bygone fortress town. At the end of the line, the company built a small hotel, an engine shed, a blacksmith shop and two duplex houses for the workers. With the railway, there was finally a link to Sydney, and to the major collieries of the coal field. With access to Louisbourg's mainly ice-free harbour, it would at last be possible to ship coal and other products year-round.

The operating life of the first S&L Railroad was short. In 1883 a forest fire swept through the area and destroyed most of the wooden bridges and trestles on the Louisbourg end of the line. The fire could not have come at a worse time. Coal markets were slack and the money for repairs was not available. As a result the line was abandoned by its owners.

During its brief existence, the original S&L had a lasting effect on the Cape Breton coal industry. It proved that winter shipping was possible and it helped make mining a more continuous operation. Louisbourg, until then a tiny fishing village, was brought into the industrial age, funnily enough by learning a lesson from the 18th-century history of the once-bustling seaport. People had a market for their labour and they achieved a degree of prosperity. In the end, the fire that destroyed the rail line in 1883 proved fatal for the first S&L. There would be no phoenix rising from its ashes. At least, not for a decade.

The completion of the S&L Railroad to Louisbourg in 1895 coincided with a significant date in the town's distant past, the 150th anniversary of the siege of 1745. The Railway was launched on a high note full of pomp and circumstance. It would be hard to match again in the workaday life of a commercial rail line. The 1895 version of the Sydney and Louisburg differed greatly from its predecessor. From the roadbed up, the S&L was built and equipped in a manner that suggested permanence. The new route from Sydney to Louisbourg was 37 miles long and came within striking distance of most mining areas in the Cow Bay and Glace Bay basin.

### *The Crews*

Maintaining the roadbed and track was a never-ending job. For the purpose of repair and upkeep, the S&L, like every other railway of any size, was divided in sections. Originally, there were 18 sections. Over time that number diminished to five. Each section had a foreman and a crew of five men on average, to make sure the rails were kept in good condition. Each group followed a routine that involved a daily inspection of the entire track to see that everything, rails, roadbed and switches were in good order.

In the early days, inspections were done from a pumpcar with its seesaw handles, familiar as a favourite prop in silent movies. Later, a gas-powered motorcar or "speedy" replaced the muscle power of the pumpcar. More recently, a truck with retractable steel wheels is used to bring men and materials to the work site. Ditching the roadbed to maintain proper drainage, replacing culverts, renewing wooden ties and stone ballast and a hundred other routine tasks were done on a priority basis. But those routines were put aside when an emergency arose: a derailment or a run-off, a washout or a heavy snowstorm.

Crews were on 24-hour call. If the task was too big for one crew, men from other sections were called in to help. Veterans of the S&L can recall many occasions when

getting the trains rolling again took an all out effort lasting three or four 24 hour shifts. Snowstorms could be, as one veteran railroader put it, “pretty tough going.”

Another painstaking job was that of righting engines and railcars that had gone off the tracks. Getting them back on the tracks took skill and patience. In the early days much of the effort was “bull work” with fairly rustic equipment. The track was straightened or realigned by gangs of men with steel pry bars. Spikes were driven in the classic style by two men swinging their sledge hammers in perfect syncopation, tapping out a beat that was once as much the rhythm of the railroad as the clickety-clack of the steel wheels. Today, much of that work is done by a motorized spiking machine.

Early railroaders were innovative in using what they had to get a job done. Often they called in a second engine to nudge a derailed locomotive back onto the tracks. Like a beached whale, the mighty machine was prodded and poked; wedges placed under its wheels until it was manoeuvred, inch by painstaking inch, back onto the track. It was dangerous, frustrating work where one slip could prove disastrous, even deadly.

Especially in winter, the task of calling the crews out to work was sometimes easier said than done. Longtime S&L engineer Lauchie MacDonald remembers how as a youth he had been a “call boy” for the railway. This meant he had to trek through the Whitney Pier district calling out a train crew. This had to be done on snowshoes on occasion. The company rule was that employee seniority lists were posted on a “call board,” and when a supervisor was making up a crew from that list he would send out the “call boy” to contact each employee.

### *Lingo*

Railroading, like most trades, developed its own vocabulary over time. To the uninitiated, “shifting links,” “sliding blocks,” “cross heads,” and “equalizing beams,” sound mysterious. To people who were on a steam railway, however, such terms were a familiar part of the daily work routine.

As it was essential for each unit or section of the S&L to spend many long hours together – the same men might work together for decades – it was inevitable that working relationships among crew members came to resemble those of an extended family. Part of the relationship, and the routine, was that good-natured joking and teasing went on throughout the working day. Everyone had a nickname. Equally, everyone had a story to tell. Some railway men also liked to compose humorous verses to entertain their fellow workers. The poems below were composed by Archie MacVicar and Joe R. MacDonald, on the occasion of Mr. MacVicar’s retirement from a lifetime around the tracks, first with the S&L and then with the DEVCO Railway. “The Donald Report” that is referred to is the report of a Royal Commission that recommended nationalizing the Cape Breton coal mines and the transfer of the S&L Railway to DEVCO.

Farewell

ARCHIE MACVICAR, November 29, 1968

My last run for DEVCO I remember quite well,  
Joe R. he was driving and going like hell.  
We had 202 the pretty and Red Van  
And Alex-Nick was the CON-DUC-TOR-MAN.

I felt a bit blue but didn't let on  
We had Charlie Dickson, and we had Donald John,  
When we started our workout, 'twas snowing quite hard.  
The shop first said Angie and then the Coal Yard.

When you finish the Coal Yard, there's no time for soup:  
O'Neil's has no empties, get a train off the loop.  
Wherever I wander, and wherever I go,  
I will always remember the High and the Low.

I gave up my turn and I'm done using sand,  
I'm heading for Louisbourg, the best in the land.  
I'm going on pension and happy for that  
And I'm asking you Gillis, LOOK AFTER THE CAT.

Now time is a-passing, I must end this rhyme;  
The day's work is over, we're in just on time.  
I gave my lunch can to Kenny, for myself kept the quart,  
God bless you all and the DONALD REPORT.

Response:

THE S&L BOYS, November 30, 1968

No more stories, no more lies  
For all that's left of us poor working guys.  
We're going to miss you and miss you a lot  
We'll see you at Christmas and I hope have a shot.

From its birth to its death, the fate of the S&L Railway was tied to that of the coal industry. The line had been created quite simply out of a desire to transport coal to its winter port (Louisbourg). With the decline in the coal trade after World War II it was inevitable that the S&L would feel the effects. The freight and passenger service of the S&L, even in the best of times, never accounted for more than 25 per cent of the company's revenue. By 1960 – with better roads and many more cars and trucks – that figure declined to about 3 per cent. Clearly, the railway would not have a future if the coal industry was not thriving.

In 1963, after nearly 70 memorable years of carrying workers, picnickers, and shoppers, the passenger service of the S&L was discontinued. Five years later, the federal government passed legislation to create the Cape Breton Development Corporation (DEVCO). The legislation contained no provision for the maintenance of a rail line to Louisbourg. Instead, the S&L Railway was absorbed as a small part of the coal division of DEVCO. The rail division was re-named the DEVCO Railway. Within months, the tracks to Louisbourg were lifted and sold for their scrap value. With that, the S&L's run through Cape Breton history was finally over.

These selections originally appeared in *Tracks Across the Landscape: the S&L Commemorative History* by Brian Campbell, with A.J.B. Johnston, published in 1995 by the University College of Cape Breton Press.

© 1995 Sydney Louisbourg Railway Historical Society