

Vanishing Prairie Icons: Where Main Street Meets Railway Avenue

by John H. Althouse



This marvelous portal could often be found simply by walking to the end of Main Street to the point where it met Railway Avenue. Photo by author.

Once upon a time not so very long ago almost every prairie settlement had a magical and wondrous portal. This portal was a place of great activity, of noise, of excitement, of mystery, of commerce, of gathering, and of conversation. It was a place where one could easily view much of the multifaceted, revolving human drama of the community throughout each year. This was the place where many of our immigrant ancestors first entered an area where they would attempt to establish a new life often under the most difficult of conditions. This gateway also channeled other visitors, esteemed and reviled into the prairie community.

The portal brought more than this array of people to the community. It also brought exotic treasures, including orders carefully gleaned from the pages of the major catalogues. These packages often contained the very substances from which dreams were made. The contents of these packages might show a family's rise in prosperity after struggling on an area farm or in the settlement. Such purchases showed they had succeeded and now could afford what not long before they had considered "a frivolous luxury." This portal was the place where seasonal, even exotic commodities might arrive in the community, like the yearly picking of Red Delicious BC apples packed in wooden boxes.

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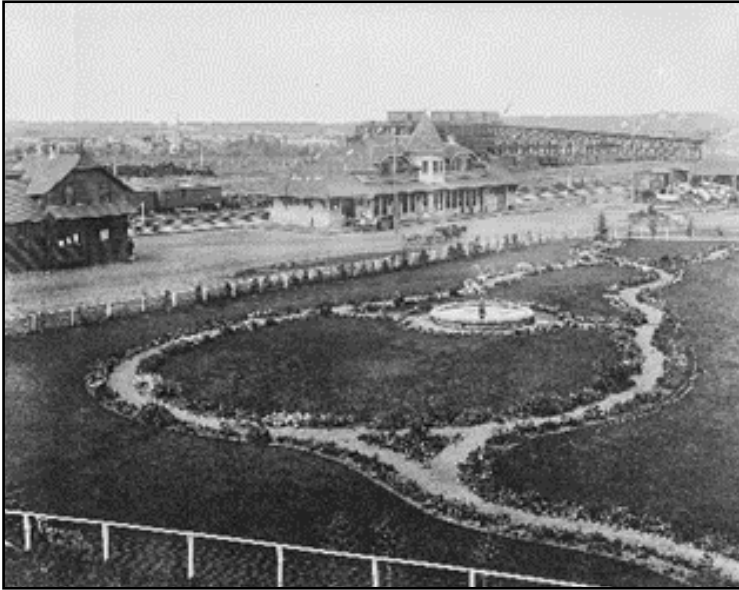
The portal also served as a point of departure from the community. In most instances, the departures through this portal were just temporary to engage with some other place for a short interlude. It was a portal through which newlywed couples might venture out for a few days of fun and excitement before settling into the routines of married life. It took citizens to cities where they could do business or acquire services not provided at home, spend time shopping, visit friends and relatives, or simply take in events. However, there were also departures where those who left did not return. Such as a farm families who had particularly disastrous farming experiences or a merchant family who had lost all in a fire and thus might leave the place permanently. These latter departures evoked discussion years after they happened, beginning with same basic query, "Whatever happened to..." followed by the name of the lost individual or family. The town portal served as the conduit through which young warriors left home for distant lands in which they would battle; some would never return.



Big Valley with CNR Station right and hotel across Railway Avenue on Main Street left. Photo by author.

"Where was this wonderful place?" you ask. In many prairie settlements, it could be found simply by walking to the end of Main Street to the point where it met Railway Avenue. There, you would find this portal: the town's railway station. While the basic operations and activities at all such portals were essentially the same, the station was not the same in every community. It was shaped in part by the rail company who operated the line there and had determined the form it would assume. This often reflected the size and stature of the settlement and surrounding area as well as the esteem with which it and the line on which it was

located were held. It often was the first building of any size in a prairie community and the first perhaps providing some measure of architectural refinement. In most new communities, it also served as the point from which the community took shape, growing first a few blocks down Railway Avenue and then pushing outward from the station



Station gardens were part of the welcoming gateway. View of Red Deer, Alberta, 1920 "Photo A6251 courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta."

were not stimulated by civic pride as much as by the practical nature of the railway and its efforts to influence those who used their line. One observer noted, *"Every possible means was used to attract immigrants: railway station gardens were beautifully arranged to greet the new arrivals and create an impression of fertile lands. The gardens were maintained by the railway companies, and station employees and their families were strongly encouraged to care for them. Professional gardeners were hired to look after larger grounds."*

"The local nerve centres of the railways were the stations. They served many more functions than today's generations could imagine, and the man in charge was the station agent. All the jobs the railway had to perform in a small town were there, packed under one roof." Inside, there was the hustle and bustle of people coming and going to carry out the business of the station. It was the station agent who *"kept order out of the chaotic comings and goings of trains and made sure that the distances between trains was safe."* His office was strategically located in the station with a bay window extending outward onto the platform. This provided the agent with a panorama in which he could easily view not only everything happening on the station platform, but throughout the entire railyard.

Both inside and outside the station was a symphony for the senses. You could hear the regular staccato of fingers striking typewriter keys and hear the uneven cadence of the clicking of telegraph messages being sent and received. A man dressed in slacks, white shirt with armbands on each sleeve, vest, and tie wearing a distinctive visor huddled over a rather plain device was the source of these patterned clicks. Nearby, behind a wicket of shiny metal bars, stood an employee who sold tickets and other services offered by the railway, provided schedule information, and answered any questions. As time neared for the arrival of a major passenger train, people would begin to flow into the station's passenger lobby in greater numbers, both raising the noise level and the activity at the wicket and lobby. There, one might detect the faint scent or the taste of chalk dust as it was used to record on a large blackboard contained the times of arriving and departing trains. It was essential that this board be kept updated. Failure to do so resulted in a fine deducted from the pay of the agent. Clocks in solid varnished natural wood cases and set to the correct time

along Main Street. The station could boast being conveniently adjacent to the business district of the embryonic community. No matter how large or how small a prairie railway station was, the very lifeblood of the community coursed through its veins. These stations, however, were important enough to cause the passenger trains to stop at each of them. Each station was an important of hub of community activity and vital means for it to access the outside world.

These portals were often graced with a flower garden which lay between Railway Avenue and the station. *"Station gardens were part of the welcoming gateway to the travelling public, an introduction to the urbanity of the area and the productiveness of the soil."* For immigrants who had just traversed seemingly endless distances across the Canadian Shield, this garden gave some of these new arrivals their first assurance that they had not arrived at the gates of hell but perhaps those of paradise. These gardens



The local nerve centres of the railways were the stations. Staff Canadian Pacific Railway Office, Innisfail, Alberta, 1912. "Photo A6208 courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta."



Mail and baggage carts were laden with a variety of fare. Photo courtesy of Louise Perkins.



There were the letters carefully written in white chalk on a blackboard. Photo by author.



One might hear the uneven cadence of the clicking of telegraph messages being sent and received. Photo courtesy of Louise Perkins.

were readily visible. You might hear the ticking of these instruments, the clicking of their pendulums as they swung back and forth rhythmically or hear their basal gong announcing the hour.

The building itself was both distinctive and sturdy and it was one of the earliest structures erected in most new town-sites in Western Canada. It was often one of the most distinctive and stately structures in a settlement. The size,



The frames and walls of all stations exuded sturdiness. Construction of Railway Station at Fabyan, Alberta, 1920s. "Photo A17621 courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta."

colour, shape, and layout could vary noticeably from station to station. However, certain aspects of each station remained consistent. All stations were formidable buildings well-equipped to meet any climatic challenges thrown its way. Features of the building, like the large eave overhanging the station platform, provided a measure of protection from the elements. The frames and walls of all stations exuded sturdiness. Doorways were plentiful, linking the various rooms within the structure to enable easy passage for anyone desiring to move from one area to another. Movement was frequent and necessary for the smooth operation of all aspects of railway activity at the site. Interiors were painted and kept clean and tidy.

Mail and baggage carts both four-wheeled and two-wheeled in a colour dictated by railway allegiance were laden with a variety of fare including grey canvas mailbags, crates, cream cans, or an array of boxes in an almost endless variety of sizes, shapes, and descriptions ready to be loaded onto a scheduled train or simply awaiting delivery. Some large four-wheeled carts were often loaded with suitcases and trunks in a rich array of shades and dictating varied origins and circumstances of their owners. However, luggage and mail were not the sole cargo temporarily held on these carts. They often included area produce being sent off. They might contain wire crates containing cackling fowl being sent to market or many other local goods being dispatched in small quantities. Carts loaded with incoming goods might include treasured items ordered from the latest catalogs.

There were dangers lurking at these railway stations, especially for an unwary child. In childhood, I had been firmly instructed by my parents that I was not to go near this wonderous place unless I was accompanied by one of them or another adult family member. So, my trips there were less frequent than I might have liked; yet, they were

Outside on the station platform, there was even more to stimulate the viewer including the letters carefully written in white chalk on a blackboard showing the scheduled arrivals and departures of passenger trains passing through.



The station agent "kept order out of the chaotic comings and goings of trains and made sure that the distances between trains was safe." Photo courtesy of Louise Perkins.

most welcome on the rare occasions when they occurred. I watched all the activity at the station and on the station platform to be a truly wonderful scene. To me, it was as marvelous as the three-ring circus that annually visited our town. It was as complex as the bazaars in faraway lands that I had seen periodically in feature shows at our local theatre on Saturday afternoons. The station and activity there started me dreaming of places far away.

When a train approached and then entered a station, there were even more sensations to appreciate. While still out of sight, a person at the station would be alerted to a train's impending arrival by the long, sharp and sustained plaintive cry of its whistle. One might hear it yet again as it approached a crossing of a major highway near town. As the train moved closer to the station, a person would hear constant chugging of a steam engine laboring to pull its massive load. Nearing its stop, one could hear it braking with the metal wheels squealing out their protest at being restrained. Finally, when the train came to a stop, there would be a release of a large billowing cloud of steam. It seemed like the engine was providing a large sigh of relief at being able to rest from pulling its onerous burden. This rest was an abbreviated one lasting only long enough to deposit the components of the train's load to be delivered to this specific station and to load the cargo meant to leave on this train. When these tasks were completed, the train would begin building up its steam and when ready began pulling away from its spot in front of the station slowly at first but constantly building in intensity.



Outside on the station platform, there was even more to stimulate the viewer. Railway Station, Camrose. [date unknown] "Photo A8998 courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta."

Any child who ever read "The Little Engine That Could" would readily hear the rising crescendo of "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can. I think I can" uttered in increasing strength and rapidity as the mighty steam locomotive built up a head of steam and gained control of its heavy load.



As the train moved closer to the station, a person would hear constant chugging of a steam engine laboring to pull its massive load. Photo courtesy of Louise Perkins.

There were two times each day when activity on the platform of the station were particularly frenzied. These were as the major passenger trains one from each direction approached and arrived in the town. Then, anyone who was in town with nothing else to do would amble over to the platform and join the congregation of locals gathered there. The crowd would gradually come together in the moments before the train would assemble. At first, the conversations would take the form of greetings. The state of local affairs including crop conditions, weather, latest community events, and politics would be discussed. A little business related to the station or completely independent of it might be raised. There might be details exchanged about area residents known to be returning on the arriving train and details real or the result of speculation of their departure and return.

When the train had pulled into the station and come to a stop, its passengers would begin to detrain. Those individuals who were expected would most often be met by a family member or friend. After hugs and less frequently a kiss exchanged, the traveler's luggage would be secured, and the party would wend their way homeward. Strangers were subjected to much closer scrutiny. Strangers often would arouse the suspicions of residents as the stranger's purpose for being there

was often the subject of speculation and a ready topic for casual conversation. In the minds of the residents assembled on the platform, this was necessary as it served as one means of protecting their community from any vile influences that might enter from the outside and pose a threat to the local citizens. The purposes of those exiting the train became the subject of speculation which easily and often quickly evolved into idle gossip. In the case of some travelers, the name on a sample case might provide a clue to the traveler's work and the purpose his visit. A traveler without luggage drew a deeper curiosity from the crowd. Would that person become a drain on the resources of the community temporarily or perhaps even permanently?



*Stations like this one nestled securely in a coulee below Munson in southern Alberta have disappeared from many prairie towns.
Photo by author.*

Often strangers arriving on a train from points unknown were solitary figures with no one to meet them. They might inquire of the local station agent about where they might find comfortable accommodations and hearty meals for the term of their stay in town. The station agent spurred by company loyalty would most often direct travelers to the railway company's own hotel. It generally was close at hand often just across Railway Avenue on Main Street. Then, the stranger would pick up his or her luggage and head off to the hotel, most often in the hope of a good night's sleep after a long day of travel. Some of the railway hotels in the cities of the Prairie Provinces were palatial and still magnificent landmarks in the cities in which they were erected. Those in smaller communities while not as opulent were known for their fine rooms and facilities and were landmark buildings in their communities.

Through the early days of the railways in Western Canada, nearly 2,000 stations were constructed. However, by the time I made a train trip to Vancouver in the mid-1960s, signs of the decline of these once important structures were evident. Several stations had closed while others provided only limited service. This decline continued as passenger service was curtailed and cancelled, telegraph lines were removed, some rail lines were closed, and other lines were completely removed.

During this decline, the stations fared badly and after being closed began to gradually disappear from the landscape of the Prairie Provinces. Country stations were closed and then abandoned. Many of them were sold off, demolished, or rudely ripped from their original site in the heart of the community or were stripped of their many distinctive trappings. The uses of stations sold were varied. Some became acreage homes, lake cottages, farmhouses or ancillary farm buildings. Even those few stations surviving on their original site now serve a function very different from the one it was for which it was originally constructed. Some stations experienced a breath of new life as a restaurant, a



Perhaps, during your travels, you will have a chance encounter with one of them, and the opportunity to visit it. Photo by author.

visitors' center, or a local museum. A few fortunate station buildings, through community efforts or those of an individual or group of individuals have been maintained on or near their original sites in a manner that allows visitors to recapture glimpses of these important structures as they once were. One writer reflects, *"There is no other part of our country that has been so utterly dependent on the railway for its development than Canada's prairie provinces."* The remaining local railway stations in each prairie settlement, have become museums providing insight into this once important place and part of our Western Canadian heritage.

Ron Brown in his book *The Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* concludes by writing,

"...there is the awareness that stations are part of a heritage that goes far beyond the style of the building or its size, or even beyond the specific role it played in a particular community. The station is much more. It was the gateway for many newly arriving Canadians, it was the social heart of the small-town Canada, it was the gateway through which immigrants entered to seek new life in a new land, and it was the door through which many Canadians left their homes, some never to return. It was part and parcel of the creation of this land, a symbol of a nation. The station may be a thing of the past, for the most part, but it is a past that should never be forgotten, even though the train doesn't stop there anymore."



Small stations like these were beginning to close by the 1960s. Photo by author.

The few remaining railway stations are not extinct. Perhaps, during your travels, you will have a chance encounter with one of them, and the opportunity to visit it. Most of these survivors no longer see hustle and bustle, the vitality they knew in bygone days. However, as you stand in a former station, you may think you can hear the repetitive tap, tap, tap of a phantom telegrapher. Outside, from somewhere in the distance, you may hear the shrill, plaintive whistle of a ghost train. Later, standing on the platform, you may hear the rush and hiss of steam as the engine relaxed, the creaking agony of the moving mail and baggage carts under their heavy loads, the milling of a crowd alive with laughter and conversation, or perhaps, a spectral conductor calling, *"All aboard!"* - a call to embark for whatever lays ahead. While the few remaining stations are only hazy reflections of their former selves, they continue to be portals. However, the primary cargos of these portals are now memories, rekindled for those who experienced our railway stations in their glory. They act to unveil enhanced perspectives about our heritage for those who never directly experienced the energy and vitality of a Western Canadian railway station when it was the major connection between the small town and the world.

References available on request from rseditor@abgenealogy.ca

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