

Labour Unrest On the Grand trunk Pacific



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The presence of a large-scale employer such as a railway brings a variety of changes to a small rural community. Labour unrest is not a copy many small towns are likely to experience, but with a national operation such as a railway, what happens in one part of the country affects the staff across the land..

The First Strike

The Grand Trunk Pacific had been in operation on the prairies for only a few years when a widespread strike hindered operations.

The strike against the G.T.P. was declared on Oct. 10, 1911 by machinists and boilermakers who sought parity to CP. and CN workers. Objectives included a 9 hour day and a minimum of 45 ½ cents per hour.

The Voice, October 13, 1911 (Page 1)

**GOVERNMENT APPOINTS
THIRD MAN**
Strike on G.T.P. Has Demonstrated That Company
Was Not Fair With Board or Men

The Machinists and Boilermakers on the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway went on strike on Tuesday last, as forecasted in our last issue. The cessation of work was effective from Westport to Edmonton. The shops at Rivers, which had been shut down as a reply to the men's demand for a definite understanding with the company, were immediately opened up and big inducements offered to keep men at work.

The G.T.P. is but at the beginning of its operations in the west, and the officials seem to think that it would be a great stroke of business to defeat all attempts at organization among the employees. The C. N. R. took the same course at the time it was opening up mileage, and the celebrated Dan went so far as to prophesy that there never would be any

Winnipeg newspaper , "The Voice" covered the strike in detail on Oct. 3.

After a few months, the effects of the strike was beginning to have its effect on the community. There were reports of skirmishes at the river between strikers and strikebreakers. A leading official of the international association of machinists addressed a mass meeting at which local professional men spoke. G.T.P. general manager E. J. Chamberlin briefly visited the scene, and then departed.

Rivers was created by the railway. The workers who came here to work were not entering an established town so much as creating a town. They were part of it from the beginning, not outsiders brought in to work. For that reason it is likely that the non-railway townspeople would tend to side with the workers rather than the management.

That indeed was the opinion of G.T.P. general assistant C. Warman, who was not too happy about it. He had this comment (or threat) published in the local paper: "If the railway is in trouble, the town usually sides against it. If there is rioting, they are more likely to consort with the rioters than with the railway and the authorities endeavoring to preserve the peace...Retention of the shops at Rivers or at any other terminal of the Grand Trunk Pacific may depend in no small measure upon the attitude of the people who inhabit these terminal towns."

There were bound to be some disputes. IN one case some striking workers took alternate work painting and that was not well received by those already engaed in that work. But he more damaging effects of the strike might never have reached this small town except for the introduction of strike breakers from the outside.

The Brandon Sun on Oct. 18 reported that 100 strike breakers from Montreal had reached Rivers and the the new workers would replace those out at various points. It notes that, "The strikers here are orderly, but the bringing in of strike breakers is strongly resented."

The report was an exaggeration as only about ten boilermakers and two machinists were sent to Rivers, but as one might expect there were a few incidents.

'One of the Strikers' in the local press commented that, "we could not have called a strike at a better time. The Company's power is now in deplorable condition. Of course, the public is suffering and we are sorry for the public. . .Strike-breakers do not know the meaning of truth. . ."

These sorts of exchanges were to be expected, but the small close-knit community no doubt expected little more in the way of drama. That made it all the more shocking when one altercation between a strike-breaker and a striker escalated into gunfire and death. It seems that a strike breaker, when confronted by a striker, produced a pistol, and in the scuffle that followed shots were fired killing on and injuring another. (See The Alston Murder Trial).

But that was certainly the exception, and for the most part the town weathered the storm by waiting it out.

<p style="text-align: center;">The Rivers Strike.</p> <p>Rivers, Man., Oct. 17—A special train carrying a hundred strike breakers from Montreal reached here this evening about 9 o'clock. The train consisted of two cars, and it is understood that the men brought in will take the places of the striking machinists and boilermakers at various points in the Grand Trunk Pacific in the west. The train stopped at the roundhouse and the men went to a number of boarding cars that have been equipped for their accommodation.</p> <p>The strikers here are orderly, but the bringing in of strike breakers is strongly resented.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Brandon Sun, Oct 18, 1911</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Representatives of G. T. P. Strikers To Wait on Government.</p> <p>R. S. Ward, sec.-treasurer of District No. 2, International Association of Machinists; C. E. Shaw, Graham, Ont.; J. A. Moran, Edmonton; and Wm. Renton, Rivers, left last night for Ottawa, where they will interview the Minister of Labor and the Minister of Railways on the standing of the government on the question of the Grand Trunk Pacific strike, which is now in its fourteenth month. Organized labor throughout Canada is becoming restive under the prolonged irritation occasioned by the strike and resolutions are pouring in upon the government from all over Canada demanding that drastic efforts be made in order to make the Company come to time and treat their men with decency.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Voice, Oct 13, 1911</p>
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It took some time, and over a year had gone by before the end was in sight. In December of 1912 representatives of the G.T.P. strikers, including William Renton from Rivers, met with the Minister of Labour in Ottawa about the strike, which had now lasted 14 months. It was settled shortly afterwards, with the strikers gaining most of their demands.

The Winnipeg General Strike

In 1919 at the time of the Winnipeg General Strike the neighborhood railroaders quit work in a body. Another ex-minister of the gospel and now a labor leader, James Woodsworth, spoke at a meeting arranged by local unions - this just prior to a riot in the provincial capital. No violence, however, marred the Rivers scene and the dispute was settled quickly.

The 1950 Strike

In 1950, for the third time in the community's history a nation wide strike shut down the shops, freight shed, depot and station restaurant and telegraph. In the roundhouse lay idle a solitary locomotive, the yard engine: and while highway conveyances delivered the necessities of life. The strike lasted nine days.

The Alsford Murder Trial



The Alsford Murder Trial

In late 1911, the effects of the ongoing strike by Grand Trunk Pacific employees was having its effect on the community. There were reports of skirmishes at the river between strikers and strikebreakers. A leading official of the international association of machinists addressed a mass meeting at which local professional men spoke. G.T.P. general manager E. J. Chamberlin briefly visited the scene, and then departed.



What is known as the Rivers manslaughter case commenced before Chief Justice Mathers and a jury at the Assize Court here this morning.

This was a case in which John Partridge, James Ashworth, William Crittenden and Myrtle Orth were charged with causing the death by shooting of Mike Prodaminck on July 11th.

And then just one week after a strikers' petition to the minister of labour (asking that measures be taken to end an acute situation) had been circulated locally - the community was shocked by the shooting of Arthur Alsford, and a striker named Jack Gribben, which took place at the Cecil Hotel on December 20. A strike-breaker known as Alf. Smith, was to be charged with murder.

Mr. Smith reportedly had, without provocation, began firing a revolver. The striker was hit in the stomach while the porter received groin wounds. Smith, himself, sustained a skull fracture.

Arthur Alsford, husband and father, veteran of the South African war, died in Brandon hospital on Christmas Eve, and coroner's jury found he had come to his death as the result of a bullet wound received from a revolver in Smith's hands. Rivers band attended the funeral service held in the Anglican church. Friends and union members followed the cortege to the cemetery in 30-below weather. Boilermakers and machinists raised funds with which to assist the stricken family and the efforts of the Somerville family to ease the blow received community commendation.

In the spring of 1912, Jack Gribben returned from hospital after being relieved of a bullet located above his hip-bone (a second such missile having been found - after passing through the man's body - in a hip-pocket) about the time Alfred Smith went on trial for the murder of Arthur Alsford.

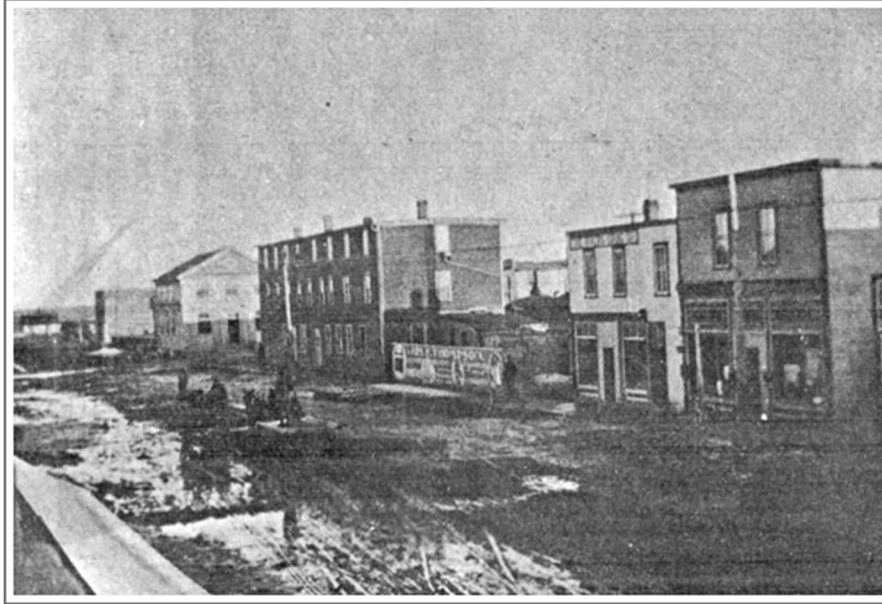
Mr. Alsford was a former boiler maker's helper at the GTP shops in Rivers, who had left that job prior to the strike. He belonged to the Boiler Maker's Union. There were about 90 members of that union and they had about a dozen on picketers on duty at the time.

The incident arose out of tensions surrounding the Grand Trunk Pacific strike and the use of strikebreakers in Rivers and other locations. The strike had of course caused the usual hard feelings and division in the community.

There were allegations that strikers had intimidated strikebreakers. There were accusations and remarks in the local paper and reports that one strike breaker had been accosted in local church. The allegations were all denied by the strikers.

On the morning of December 20th, according to Mr. Gibben's testimony, he was helping Alston remove some empty bottles at the Cecil Hotel when they met Smith going out the door.

He asked Mr. Smith if he was working at the shops and when the answer was "yes" he asked if he was aware that he was "scabbing". At that point Smith pulled out a gun and Gibben tried to take it away from him, assisted by a Mr. Leary.



The Cecil House, near the centre of this photo was the site of the altercation that ended in the death of Arthur Alsford.

Mr. Smith claimed that he was attacked and had used his weapon to defend himself.

Mr. Gribben insisted under oath that they had not attacked Mr. Smith before he had produced a gun, and that they were trying to merely get the gun away from him when shots were fired and Mr. Alston was mortally wounded.

The bartender, Mr. Harry Ving, recalled that Mr. Smith had entered the bar, bought two bottles of liquor and that he later heard someone say something like “He’s got a gun” or, “Get that gun.” before shots were fired. Mr. Ving admitted to being a former employee of the GTP and being in sympathy with the strikers.

Cross examination brought out the fact that Gibben was something of a rover, and that he had at sometimes worked under an assumed name. The accusation was that he was an “agitator”.

He did admit to knowing ahead of time that Smith was a strike breaker and to wanting to confront him after noticing him in the bar. He admitted to telling Mr. Leary to get a stick or something to hit Smith with and to wrestling him to the ground and kicking him, but insisted that all this happened after the gun was produced.

His attitude to strikebreakers was summed up by this answer to a Defense Counsel question about his attitude towards strike breakers.

“If a man comes and takes bread and butter out of your mouth you can’t feel very friendly towards him, can you.”

Mr. Gibben also admitted that he had been part of a group that did harass some strikebreakers but denied that Alston was any harder on strikebreakers than anyone else, just sympathetic to the strikers.

Dr. Schwann, who had been called to the scene, recalled that when he arrived the prisoner was being held down and that he observed severe bruises on his head.

Mr. Gibben's testimony was somewhat corroborated by a bystander Tim Slattery who reported that when he came on the scene Smith was being held down by Gibben and Leary while Alston lay helpless and wounded. Slattery was also a Union member.

Other witnesses such as Police Constable Conrad Matthews, testified that Smith was well acquainted with revolvers such as the Smith and Wesson 32 caliber pistol he had, and that he wouldn't have fired it accidentally. He also testified in those early minutes after he arrived on the scene, that someone shout out, "Lynch him", and that Smith would have been in danger had he not been there to protect him.

The Constable mentioned an incident two weeks prior to the shooting when he had removed Smith from a bunch of strikers but that there had been no threats at that time.

George Sommerville, the Hotel owner testified that he didn't welcome strikebreakers in his hotel but when they did appear he saw that they were protected. He was accused by the defense of uttering threats toward Smith on an earlier occasion.

There was testimony that despite this serious incident the strike had been relatively peaceful.



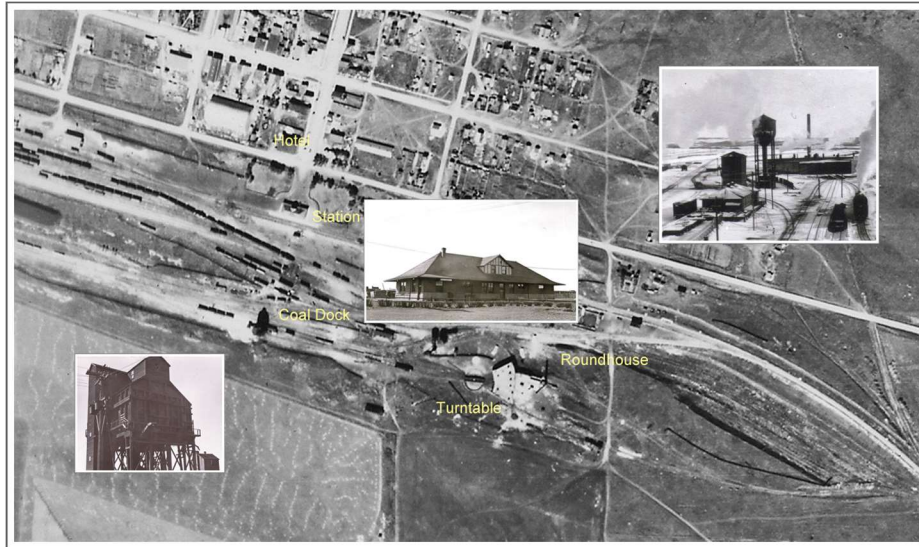
From the Brandon Sun, March 22, 1912

In his summation to the jury Prosecutor, Matheson reminded them that although Gibben had no right to accost Smith and question him, if Smith pulled a gun we must assume he was responsible for Alston's death.

Despite provocation, went his argument; Smith had no right to shoot. He said, "It is permissible in Texas, Colorado or Virginia, but not in Manitoba."

In the end, Smith won acquittal with the jury unable to conclude that he had intended to commit murder, but the locals, especially union members were not convinced. When he and re-visited old haunts one newspaper offered that opinion that that showed "very bad taste". "Many strikers think only the 'black cap' would have done justice." Smith laid charges against Gribben and three other men in connection with the hotel incident. That case was dismissed

The Rivers Railway Facilities



Rivers Railway Facilities – A Pictorial Tour

Image 1: This aerial view above of the Rivers Yards shows the main features, as they appeared around 1945.

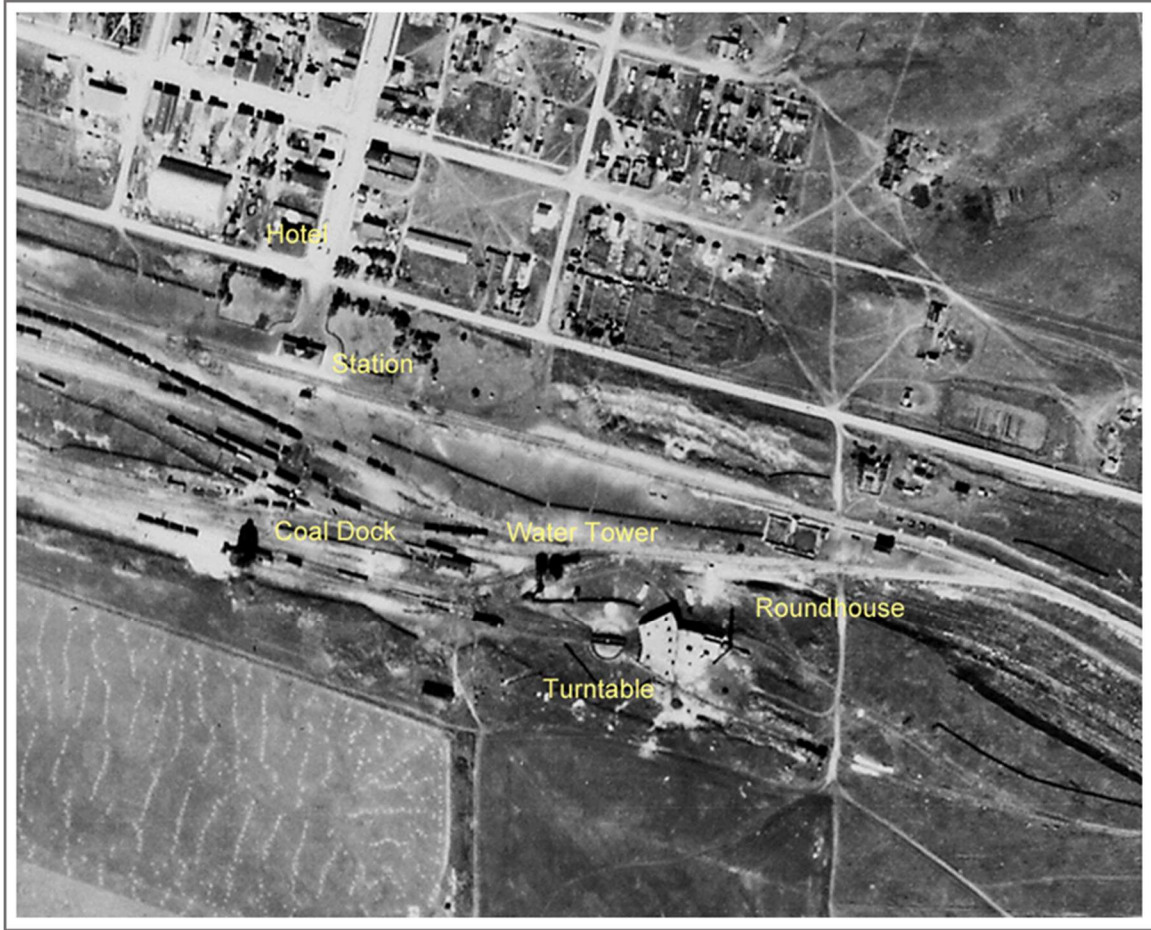


Image 2: The C.N.R. Station, which replaced the Great Northern Station after the fire of 1917.



Image 3: The Alexandra Hotel – conveniently located across from the station.



Image 4: The Coal Dock – a mechanized re-fueling station. South of the station.



Image 5: Water Towers – Water was pumped from a dam on the Little Saskatchewan, nearly a kilometre to the south.



Image 6: The Roundhouse, built in 1908 and re-built in 1918. The standard service centre found at divisional points on major rail lines. With a turntable for turning the steam engines around after service.

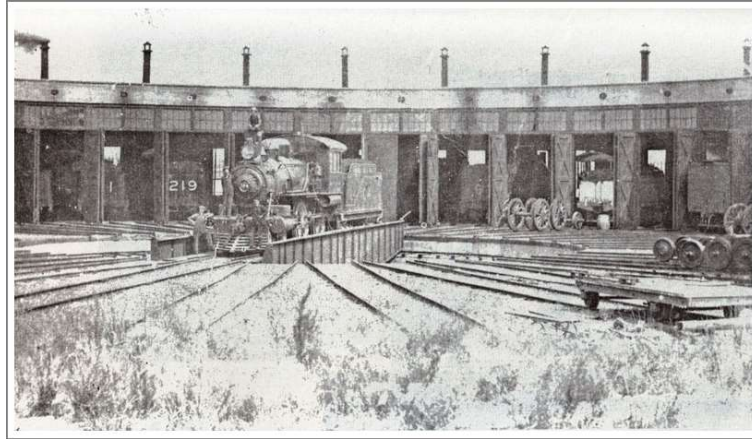


Image 7: This map shows the larger area.

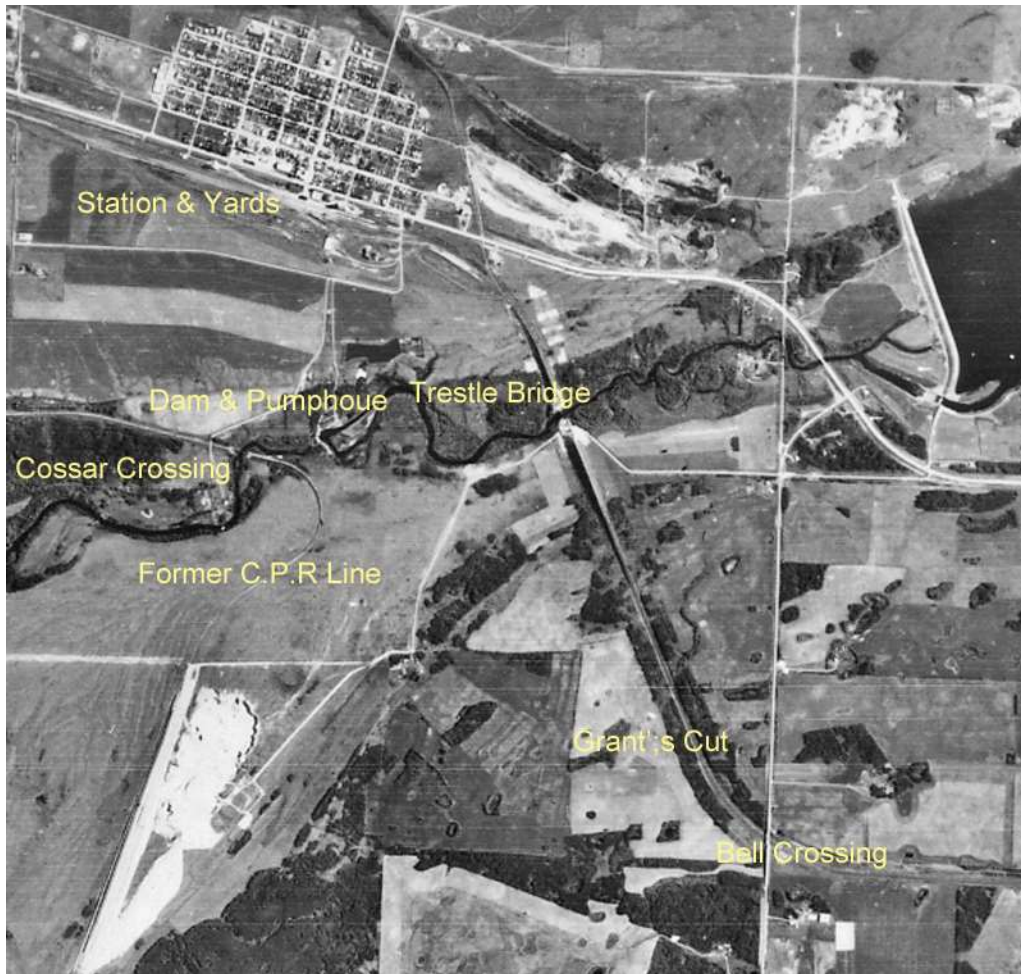


Image 8: The Rivers Grand Trunk Pacific Station, 1908 – 1917



Image 9: The Rivers Trestle Bridge, first used in 1908, shown here about 1910.

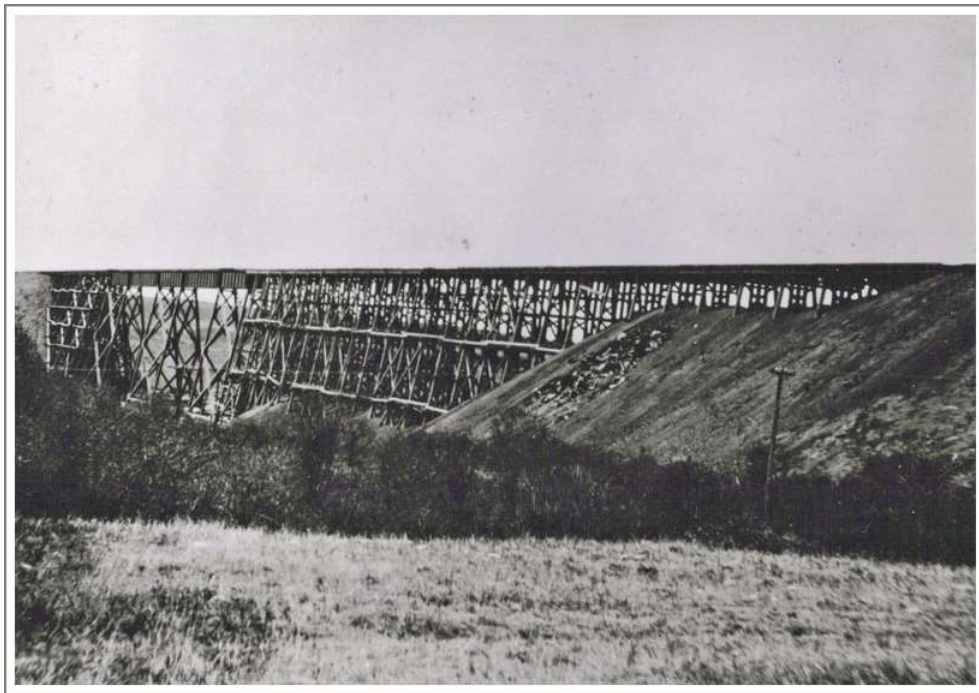


Image 10: Grant's Cut – an excavation that allows for a gentle decline to the trestle bridge.



Image 11: Bell's Crossing – important road crossing before the modern highways were built.



Image 12: Modern bridge alongside the former site of Bell's Crossing, showing the rail line curving in to Grant's Cut.



Image 13: The Pumphouse on the Little Saskatchewan River – Steam Engines needed a good supply of water.



Image 14: Former site of CPR. Dam, now washing away.



Image 15: Older photo of the Dam and Picnic Spot known as “The Tents”, taken about 1950.

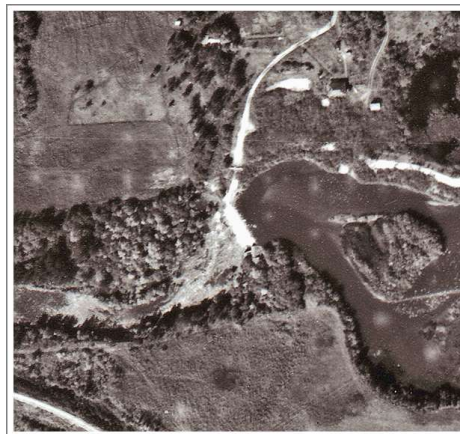
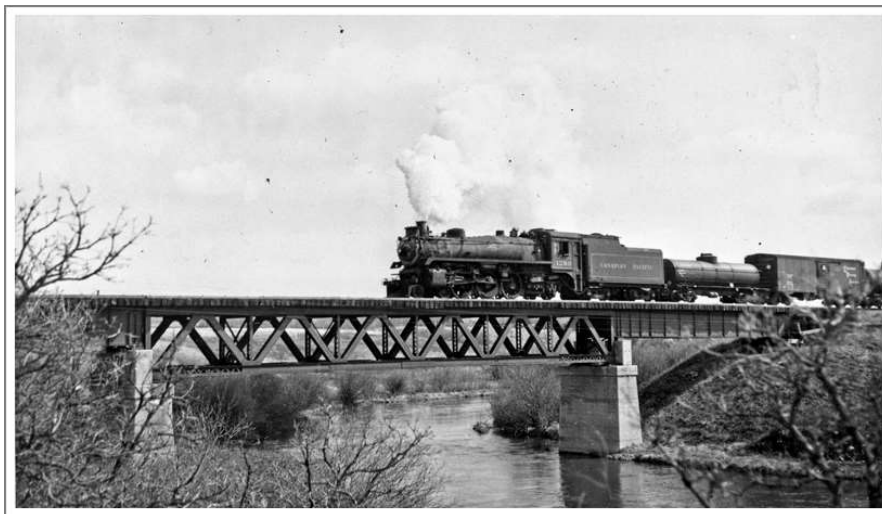


Image 16: Another photo of the dam, taken in about 2003. The Former C.P.R. Branch line which connected Brandon (by way of Chater and Forrest) with Lenore is shown in the top half of this photo. It was the first railway to serve the region. The Cossar Crossing is quite visible at the top right. The pump house is at centre left.



Image 17: Cossar Crossing – A bridge and siding on the C.P.R. Lenore Branch



Grand Trunk Pacific Railway Dam & Pump House



Grand Trunk Pacific Railway Dam & Pump House

The decision by the Grand Trunk Pacific to create the Town of Rivers as a divisional point on its new trans-continental line necessitated a number of building and engineering projects. Extensive yards and a roundhouse would be required. There would be a need for a variety of facilities and services related to the maintenance of steam locomotives.

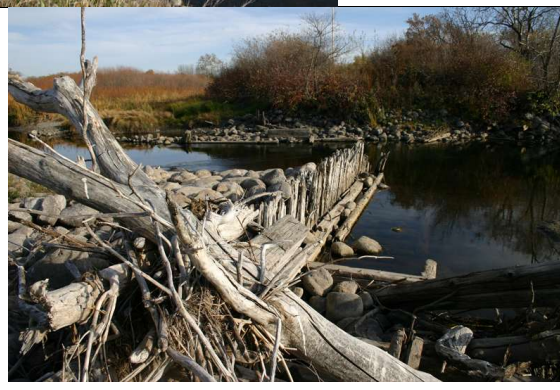
A good supply of water was essential, and the Little Saskatchewan River, while providing challenges for construction, was indispensable for the operations of the Grand Trunk Railway in Rivers.

Like all small prairie rivers, the Little Saskatchewan is very seasonal, and slows to a trickle during dry summers. By 1910, a dam was constructed to back up a dependable supply of water and a pump house built to send the water uphill to the water tower located near the roundhouse.



Aerial Views: The dam was quite near the rival C.P. line at Cossar Crossing.

Much of the dam has been washed away in recent years, but parts of the structure remain visible.



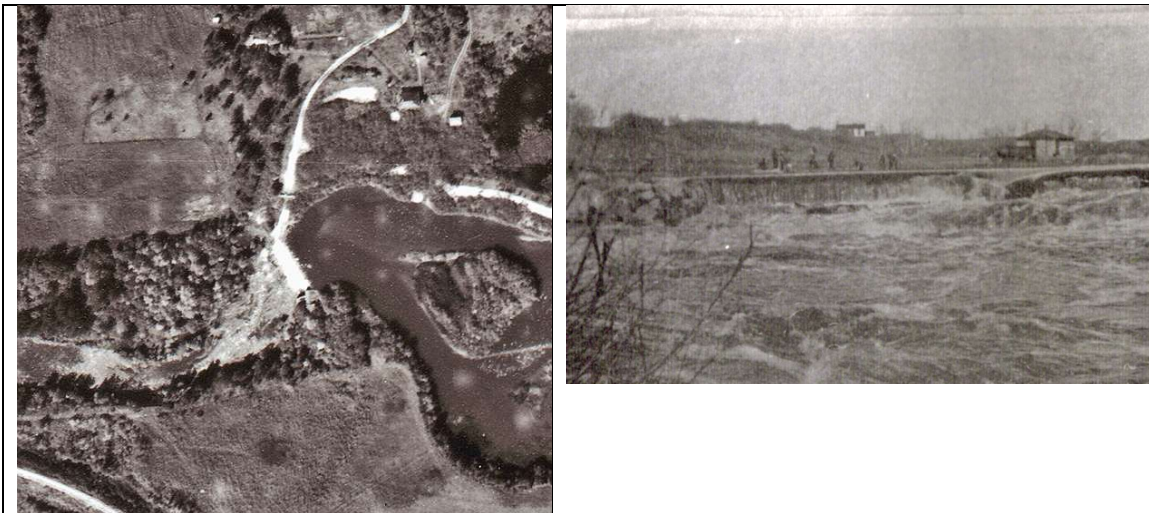
The Pump House



Operations were conducted by a pumpman, with John Borroff serving until his retirement in 1947. It could be a dangerous job. In 1917 shop-worker Olive Archer had suffered head and facial injuries when a valve blew out, and Robert McGregor was killed when caught up in the pumphouse engine.



The remains of this structure are upstream from the dam, alongside the former pump house. It would likely have been the site of the intake.



The dam, and the small lake it created, soon became a popular spot for swimming, picnicking and fishing. And like all dams it could be dangerous. In 1914 Billy McKinnon and the light craft from which he had been fishing, were swept over the dam and he was drowned.

Notable People In the Grand Trunk Pacific Story



Notable People

Britton, R.D.

Became roundhouse foreman in 1918

Buggey, W.

The first GTP Agent in Rivers, 1908

Chamberlain, Edson

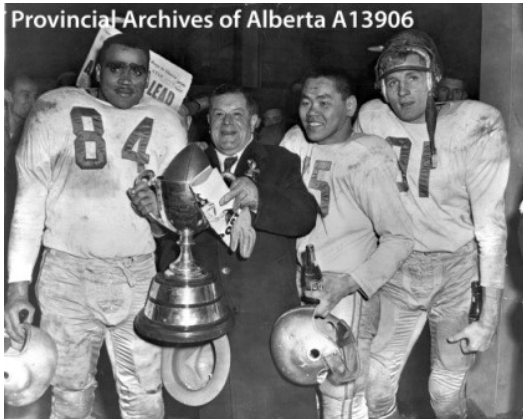
A former general manager of the Canadian Atlantic, succeeds F.W. Morse as general manager of the Grand Trunk Pacific in 1909.

Duke of Connaught

The youngest son of Queen Victoria was on the initial initial Royal train to pass over Grand Trunk Pacific lines.

Edmonton Eskimos

The Grey Cup Special stopped in Rivers both going to and coming from their victory in 1954. Locals gained souvenirs including a piece of a goal post presented to the mayor, Mr. Stratford. Locals still remember the chocolate bars with Edmonton Eskimo wrappers being handed out.



**Edmonton Eskimos,
1954 Grey Cup Champions**

Files, W

The engineer who died when his freight train ran into a gap which – prior to a cyclone had been the 115 foot high Minewaska bridge near Uno.

Frost, I.O

The first local G.T.P. carpenter foreman, left for Edmonton to supervise work there in 1910.

Haney, Horace

In charge of trestle bridge construction, including the Rivers Trestle Bridge.



Hays, Charles Melville:



Vice President of the Grand Trunk Pacific.

Charles Melville Hays was a native of Rock Island, Illinois but lived in Canada for many years. He became general manager of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway in 1896 and convinced the Canadian Prime Minister of the need for a second transcontinental railroad.

Charles M. Hays died while returning from a visit to England to Canada where he was scheduled to attend the 26 April 1912, grand opening of the Château Laurier

hotel in Ottawa, Ontario. Hays had chosen to return from England on the maiden voyage of the ocean liner RMS Titanic, which struck an iceberg south of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland the night of April 14th and sank.

Hedburg, A.E.

Arrived in 1923 as Canadian National Railways agent,

Keaton, Buster

The crew and star of *The Railroader*, a short film starring Buster Keaton, spent several days filming at the trestle bridge. Mr. and Mrs. Keaton hosted the Mayor and Chamber of Commerce at a special dinner and Mr. Keaton made an appearance at the Rex Theatre where one of his early films, "When Comedy Was King" was showing.

Kelley, Howard G.

Succeeded Edson G. Chamberlain as President of the Grand Trunk Pacific in 1917.

King George VI

For the first time in history a reigning monarch was to visit Canada. In Rivers, a royal visit committee was set up to request that the train bearing Their Majesties would stop here. The petition was granted, but the visit was somewhat of a disappointment to the fifteen thousand people who gathered as the King made only the briefest of early-morning appearances to wave from the receding coach platform.



George VI and Queen Elizabeth greet Canadians from the back of the Royal Train, in Hope, British Columbia, 1939.

Leslie, W.J.

Railway postal clerk who brought the first Grand Trunk Pacific-conveyed bag of mail into Rivers, passed away.

MacKinnon, D.E.

Began his career with the G.T.P. at Rivers where he stayed until 1913 before moving on and eventually becoming Superintendent of Motive Power with C.N. based in Transcona. (Winnipeg Evening Tribune, Jan. 31, 1942)

McGregor, Robert

A shopworker who was killed when caught up in the pump house engine, in 1917.

Prince of Wales

In 1923, H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, the future King of England, disembarked from the train and walked the ties for the last mile as it approached Rivers.

McIntyre, Robert

The Rivers man slipped beneath wheels of moving train and lost both legs 1912.

Morse, F.T.

GTP Vice-President during the early years.

Page, Mrs. Robert

The first operator of the station restaurant in 1909.

Pason, F.C.

Took over as railway locomotive foreman in 1937.

Renton, William

In December, representatives of the G.T.P. strikers, including William Renton from Rivers, met with the Minister of Labour in Ottawa about the strike, which had now lasted 14 months.

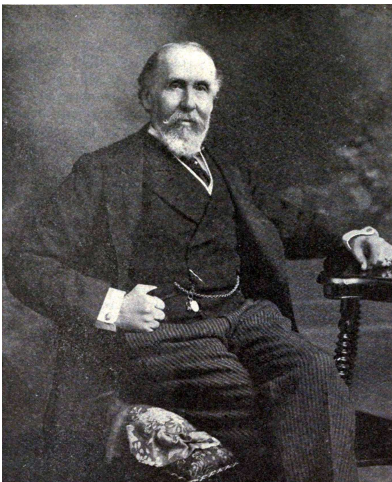
Promoted



After serving with the Canadian National Railways for 33 years, D. E. MACKINNON above, has been appointed superintendent of Motive Power, Transcona. Mr. Mackinnon was formerly general foreman at Edmonton. He succeeds Walter Nugent, who was recently appointed assistant superintendent of motive power and car equipment. Mr. Mackinnon joined the Grand Trunk Pacific at Rivers, Man., in 1909, and in 1914 was transferred to Transcona. In 1927 he was appointed shop foreman at Rainy River and was moved to Edmonton as general foreman in 1938.

Rivers-Wilson, Sir Charles

President of the Grand Trunk Pacific who oversaw the creation of the Trans-Continental line. The Town of Rivers is named after him.



Source: Wikipedia

Sifton, Sir Clifford

Manitoba MP in the Laurier Liberal gov't at the time of the GTP construction.

Sproule, J.P.

Replaced Percy Neville, 14 – year veteran, as railway locomotive foreman.

White, Samuel

The Twenty-two year old had one leg severed by a locomotive and later died. The first noted casualty in the region.

The throttle had been defective according to a coroner's inquest. The railway company was found guilty of gross negligence.

Working on the Railroad (Job Descriptions)



Working on the Railroad (Job Descriptions)

Passenger Train Personnel

Station Master/Depot Agent: □ Oversees operations connected with railroad building adjacent to tracks, where passengers and freight may be located.

Ticket Clerk: □ Stationed at the ticket window, this person provides tickets and tour information to passengers.

Baggage Clerk: □ Responsible for tagging baggage, loading, unloading and routing baggage en route between destinations.

Postal Clerk:

Survey and Construction Personnel

Civil Engineer: □ An engineer whose training or occupation is in the designing and construction of public or private works, such as railroads.

Surveyor □: One who applies geometry and trigonometry to determine the area of any portion of the earth's surface, the lengths and directions of the bounding lines, and the contour of the surface, and accurately delineates the whole on paper.

Track Layer: □ One who lays the rails in place on the rail bed.

Grader: □ Grades and shapes the continuous, level, raised bed on which tracks and ties are laid.

Teamster □: One who drives a team of horses, mules or other draft animals. Precursor to the Teamster's Union.

Train Crew

Engineer: □ Responsible for operating the locomotive.

Conductor: □ In charge of train in its entirety, and of the train crew at large.

Brakeman: □ Inspects the train, assists the conductor, operates the brakes and assists in switching.

Fireman, □ Steam locomotive: Crew who feeds the firebox with fuel. On diesel locomotives, the firemen would monitor controls and assist the engineer.

Yard or Field Operations

Switchman: □ Attends the switch in a railroad yard, switching trains from one track to another.

Signal Maintainer: Maintains signals, including those of hot box detectors, dragging equipment detectors, railroading crossings, CTC and formerly telegraph lines.

Section Foreman: □ Individual in authority over group of workers.

Section Crew: □ Group of workers responsible for assisting in yard operations.

ROADMASTERS

1. Roadmasters report to, and receive their instructions from, the Division Engineer in respect to all engineering matters, standards employed, methods and manner of doing and prosecuting upkeep, repairs and renewals, and shall report to the Superintendent on all other matters.

2. They charge of the track, roadbed and right-of-way, and are responsible for keeping everything pertaining to the roadway on their territories in safe and proper repair.

SECTION FOREMEN

1. Section Foremen receive their instructions from, and report to, the Roadmaster.

2. They have charge of the maintenance of track on their sections, and are responsible for its safety.

3. They shall carry a reliable watch, and when practicable, compare time each day with the clock at the nearest telegraph office, or with the Conductor of a train or Foreman of adjoining section.

4. They shall know the time of all regular trains at all points on their sections.

They, with their men, shall watch passing trains for dragging brake beams or rods, broken arch bars, couplers partially pulled and other easily visible defects on cars or coaches

TRACK WALKING AND INSPECTION

1. Men going out to watch track in storms or in ordinary track walking, shall have with them the prescribed signals with which to stop trains. (See Flagging Rules 64 to 81 inclusive). They shall have with them a copy of the current timetable, and must understand its use and know the times of all regular trains at any point at which they may be working. During, and for sufficient time after heavy rainstorms, all waterways shall be carefully watched and all obstructions removed therefrom.