The Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR) and the Grand Trunk Pacific (GTP) provide the perfect analogy for the old adage that hindsight is twenty-twenty. In the early part of the twentieth century both companies built transcontinental lines through the Yellowhead Pass, the lowest elevation route through the Canadian Rockies. In a colossal bungling of the tax payer supported rail industry, adversarial lines ran parallel and often crossed one another. The ruthless competitors neither wanted to become partners nor do business together. A multitude of personnel; including eager politicians, Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier the Liberal leader, the conservatives, bankers and statesmen, British investors, Canadians and Americans had their hands in the rail industry. They would shape the outcome for the next ten years in Canadian Railway history. “The power of railway companies was “monolithic as well as menacing.”

The staggering power struggle between the CNoR and GTP occurred in the first place due to the destructive workings of the French-English schism (separation from difference of opinion) in Canadian government that had beset the country since its birth. This was not evident to most Albertans until about 1910. When the GTP and the CNoR began to clearly compete with each other between Edmonton and the coast, both using the same Yellowhead pass, Albertans began to see that the two railways were intent on driving each other out of business.

Two of the major players in the Canadian railway conflict, William Mackenzie and Donald Mann were partners and started off their careers in 1904 as construction bosses to Canadian Northern Railway, they then rose to become CNoR tycoon promoters.

Their competitor and adversary, Charles Melville Hays, represented the Grand Trunk, GT. In 1900 he was the president of the persistently indebted Grand Trunk. He would also be described as a cold

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1 Frank Leonard, A Thousand Blunders, 99
2 Alberta in the 20th Century, Ted Byfield pg 103
3 Alberta in the 20th Century, Volume Two, The Birth of the Province 1900-1910 by Ted Byfield - 103
blooded raider of the treasury, according to Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton.\(^4\) Hays was a visionary, he was ambitious and he was noted as being a great orator. Verbally he could paint a picture of all the fine things the GTP could make possible, including a foreseeable steamship trade with the Orient.\(^5\)

Sifton wanted the government to back the GT in building a line from Ontario to Winnipeg, and back Mackenzie and Mann’s Canadian Northern in building a line from Manitoba through Prince Albert and Edmonton to the coast. Together they would constitute one trans-continental system. A logical plan to most, but not to Charles Melville Hays, who flatly refused to see the Grand Trunk reduced to a partnership. Their whole operation (CNoR) could easily be bought out at the right price. The directors of GT hesitated, which prompted Hays to quit and accept the presidency of the Southern Pacific. Less than a year went by and the GT directors were pleading with him to return.\(^6\) Hays came back and his first move was to approach Mackenzie and Mann, heads of the CNoR, and propose they sell out to the Grand Trunk. Hays wanted the fame and fortune that would be associated with the creation of the transcontinental railway. Unfortunately for Hays, it was 1904 and the loathsome two flatly turned Hays down. Mackenzie and Mann did not need the help of Hays or the Grand Trunk. They had assembled a great team, the west was on the verge of a boom, and their branchline system rivaled the Canadian Pacific Railway.\(^7\)

**The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR)** had cornered the western main line and taken over a collection of small railroads. The advantage that the Canadian Pacific had was that everything heading west had to use its mainline as did the railway cars coming east filled with grain.\(^8\)

\(^{4}\) Ted Byfield 103  
\(^{5}\) Ted Byfield 113  
\(^{6}\) Ted Byfield 105  
\(^{7}\) Ted Byfield 107  
\(^{8}\) Ted Byfield 107
To build railways in Western Canada, CPR received twenty five million acres from the government to dispose of in whatever manner they saw fit. The most lucrative way was to carve it up into town lots. CPR townsit site locations were meticulously chosen and rigorously executed. The CPR deliberately selected Southern Canada for its route because it was largely uninhabited, giving the CPR control over town site selection, design and sales.⁹

However, all railways did not build the same way. Canadian Northern Railway located its towns on the Northern route in Northern Canada. They built their stations on the South side of the track wherever possible because the station platform would face towards the southern winter sunshine, protecting passengers from the North wind and in turn, the waiting room would be heated naturally.¹⁰

In less than ten years, CPR and CNoR laid claim to more than 4.1 million acres of land. The majority of that land was prime prairie black soil. In 1906 the duo created more than 132 villages through Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.¹¹

As per Hays, “all was not hopeless” for the Grand Trunk.¹² Immigrants were taking up farms on the northern prairie rather than the southern, due to a huge western extension of the Grand Trunk. This extension was proposed to go through the northern passes of the Rockies, either the Yellowhead (west of Edmonton), or the Pine or Peace passes (in the Peace River country.) It would then reach the Pacific on the northern coast of BC at Prince Rupert. Government guarantees were necessary for this expensive undertaking. The cost for the GTP prairie section was $13,000 to $45,000 per mile and for the mountain section was $30,000-$100,000 per mile.¹³

⁹ Ron Brown, The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore, Page 33  
¹⁰ Ron Brown, The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore, Pg 34  
¹¹ Ron Brown, The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore, pg 37  
¹² Ted Byfield 105  
¹³ Norman J. Lowe, “Canada’s Third Transcontinental Railway” Journal of the West Oct 1, 1978 pg60
During this time period the Grand Trunk created an additional railway that would serve the west and be known as the Grand Trunk Pacific, GTP\textsuperscript{14}. The GTP built through unsettled territory and assembled 86 town sites at bargain prices. Each town plan was identical.\textsuperscript{15} There would be no land grants for the GTP. The government would guarantee its construction bonds up to $13,000 a mile with an increase in the bond guarantee for the mountain region, the completion deadline extended to eight years from five, and the Grand Trunk was allowed to market some GTP stock to raise more capital.\textsuperscript{16} After a significant amount of discussion and debating in parliament, The National Transcontinental Railway Act was proposed on September 2, 1903 and the Grand Trunk Pacific was officially incorporated on October 24, 1903. The vision that Charles Hays had was becoming a reality.\textsuperscript{17}

The first sod turning for the Western railway took place near Carberry, Manitoba on August 29, 1905. The Grand Trunk Pacific began construction in 1906 and would take eight years of difficult work and toil before it reached its destination of Prince Rupert in 1914. Charles Hays worked up until his unfortunate death in 1912 on the Titanic.

There were two important companies incorporated in 1906 to assist in the building of the railway; the Grand Trunk Pacific Branch Lines Company and the Grand Trunk Pacific Town and Development Company. The GTP Branch Lines Company was responsible for building branch lines such as the one from Bickerdike to Lovett and Mountain Park, opening up that area of the country for the exploration of coal reserves. It was finished in 1913, would be known as the Coal Branch, and home to many people and their families.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ted Byfield 107
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ron Brown, \textit{The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore}, pg 46
\item \textsuperscript{16} Alberta in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, pg 112
\item \textsuperscript{17} www.railways.incanada.net
\end{itemize}
Railway construction was a large undertaking and piqued the interest of locals in the Edmonton area. One local recalls: “Much interest centers on the GTP which aims to have a railway into Edmonton by year’s end. You can guess at the size of the railway company when I tell you what I saw yesterday. A freight train came into the city on the Canadian Northern with a freight car number that was GTP 3202646! That’s the largest number I have seen in North America to date. If one thinks of the number of freight cars, one also reflects on the number of locomotives, passenger cars, etc., that GTP possess.”

Railway mania gripped Canada at various periods. People realized the advantages of having a line run through their town. Transportation unified regions and the easier exchange of goods, services and people yielded profit, progress and development. Construction of the railroads also provided lots of work.

Commercial and social activity suggested a prosperous future for Wolf Creek, Alberta for it was here the Grand Trunk Pacific planned to build its Divisional Point. A town of 2000 rose nearly overnight at Wolf Creek, with banks, hotels, restaurants, boarding houses, dirt streets and rough dwellings.

Wolf Creek’s real estate fell victim to the speculations of “land boomers”. The land boomers knew the GTP required a considerable area of land, so they bought up all likely territory hoping to realize a lucrative return. “The GTP was held ransom with no compromise. Negotiations were futile so it prompted the decision to move the Divisional Point eight miles farther west, leaving the boomers standing on the platform as the train pulled out. This new location was neither known nor considered and didn’t appear on any maps.” It was here that the railroad engineers planted a canvas flag, beginning the accidental birth of the town of Heatherwood which would eventually become Edson.

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18 Excerpts from Ed Thomeus letters regarding the railway, by Gene Campbell
19 Ties that Bind, www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/trains A Brief History of Railways in Canada
20 Alberta in the 20th Century, Volume two – The Birth of the Province 1900-190, Ted Byfield p116
The GTP Railway brought the spotlight to Edson and area, in the winter of 1909-1910. Even before the railroad steel pushed into Edson, construction crews were working furiously on one of the big obstacles, the gorge of the Sundance Creek where it flows into the McLeod River.\(^{21}\) Here, the GTP built one of the largest wooden trestles in western Canada. The trestle was one thousand feet long, eighty feet high, one million boards of timber and one hundred thousand pounds of bolts and washers and was fondly known as the Big Eddy.

Finally, on April 17\(^{th}\), 1914 the GTP Railway line was completed in Prince Rupert, BC. The man to drive the last iron spike into the line was Edson J. Chamberlain. Chamberlain was the vice-president of GTP Railway at the time and is the namesake of our town.

George M. Phillips reported to the Edson Leader newspaper on March 30, 1912 that when the steel arrived in Heatherwood in 1910 with the population of the area was fifteen. By January, 1911, the population grew to 490 and the area became incorporated as the village of Edson. The population quickly grew to 800 by September 21, 1911 making the village of Edson large enough to be incorporated as a town. On March 15, 1912 the population again exploded to 1233 and the town had 67 places of business.\(^{22}\)

With the incorporation of Edson as a town in 1911, the GTP built a large station at the end of Main Street. Like other stations Edson's was a wonderful old building with a semaphore, bay windows, platforms and a waiting room full of memories.\(^{23}\) The Station was vital for all train operations and customers. It was a place to live, work and play. Stations became magnets for children of the area because of the activity that surrounded it. Often, if the agent of the station needed help with a job, a child would be paid $1.00 for his labor.

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\(^{21}\) Marguerite Ahlf, Edson 75 Years pg24
\(^{22}\) The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore, Ron Brown, pg 9
\(^{23}\) The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore, Ron Brown, An Illustrated History of Railway Stations in Canada 3\(^{rd}\) edition pg9
The station was considered the architectural pride of the community. It was a building that, more than any other, determined the layout of the town. Local townsmen developed new found hope where dreams could be filled, and opportunities, jobs and growth could be had.

**Railway station agents** once numbered in the tens of thousands. In Canada an agent was considered more prominent than bankers and politicians and the envy of the clergy. They had to ensure that the station ran smoothly. Railway station agents “had to be masters of many trades; they handled and remitted money, collected accounts, ordered supplies, tended gardens, sent and received telegrams and money orders and kept track of goods awaiting pick-up or shipment.” Scheduling of the train’s arrival and departure was an important duty that wasn’t to be taken lightly. The agent had to write the schedule on a black board with white chalk. According to the railroad act, failure to do so earned the agent a $5 fine plus demerits. Agents had to make sure trains didn’t collide – relaying train orders soon became the agent’s most important function. Given that the agent had numerous tasks, it wasn’t unusual for an agent to multi-task. Once proficient he could send a telegram with one hand and at the same time write a letter, carry on a conversation, or even read a book.

Nothing creates nostalgia quite like the sound of a steam whistle borne on a prairie night. For more than half a century the steam locomotives pulsed along the railway tracks of Alberta, carrying passengers, freight, and dreams. Although the rail transport allowed passengers to get from one place to the next quicker than before, according to Teresa Girardi, the trip was not the leisurely, glamorous one described above. "The train trip was really something to remember. From Blairmore to Edmonton where dad met us was not too bad, but from Edson to Mountain Park was terrible. It took one day and one night to go from Edson to Mountain Park. The train, it must be a museum coach now -- old wooden coach, wooden slat seats, coal oil lamps nailed to brackets

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24 Ron Brown, *The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore*, 99
26 Ron Brown, *The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore*, 99
27 Ron Brown, *The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore*, 99
28 Michael Breuer, Rosemary Neering – *Historic Alberta*
on coach walls, and an old wood and coal stove for heat. If you wanted air in the coach, the brakeman would come along with a long handled stick with a hook on the end to open the vent in top of the coach. I won't forget that as I still have the scar from one of the vent windows which was jerked too hard, fell out and crashed down and the glass cut my arm.”

1910 – Trains became rolling post offices. November 20, 1942 – War time witnessed staff at Montreal’s Windsor Station ploughed enough mail to fill 17 mail cars destined to Atlantic ports- 13 cars on one train alone. Each mail car accommodated 600 sacks of mail.

1950-1960’s – A dramatic drop in passenger traffic made smaller passenger lines dependent upon the mail contract revenue. Other ways of carrying mail were explored. The Canadian post office started its first air mail route in Northern Manitoba in 1927. By 1948, The Canadian Post office began air mail delivery to anywhere in the world. In 1971 Canadian post office turned almost all of its mail service over to the airline turning marginal passenger lines into money losers and most were shut down. Mail found other ways to get through and passengers had to do the same.

Freight was a large generator of funds for the rail line. Moving freight provided more revenue than moving people or mail. Hence the railways moved everything that needed to be moved. In early Eastern Canada the main freight products were lumber and farm goods. Most stations had a separate loading platform from the station itself where large items could be loaded or off loaded. In Canada, freight sheds, which were usually part of the passenger station, were often called combination stations.

29 Ross, Toni. Oh! The Coal Branch, a chronicle of the Alberta Coal Branch. Edmonton 1974 p263
30 Ron Brown, The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore, pg 15
31 Ron Brown, The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore, pg 15
Some freight was live and required special treatment. Federal regulations insisted animals be off loaded for exercise, watering and feeding. Local children often earned $1.00 helping to unload stock.  

By 1914 steel was needed for the First World War and the GTP was soon ripped up and shipped to China.

1918, December 20  The use of the collective title ”Canadian National Railways” was authorized by order in council P.C. 3122.  

1919, March 7 - The Minister of Railways is appointed as receiver for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway.  

1919, June 6 - Canadian National Railway Company is incorporated.  

1920, March 8 - The management of the Grand Trunk Pacific is entrusted to the Board of Directors appointed for the Canadian National Railways.  

1923, January 19 - The Grand Trunk Railway is amalgamated into the Canadian National. Heavy competition for dwindling resources, traffic and government assistance brought Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR), the Grand Trunk Railway and the Grand Trunk Pacific to a halt and to the brink of bankruptcy. A frenzy of expansion left them over-extended.  

1923, the CNoR, the GTP and GTR were amalgamated into the recently created Canadian National Railways (CNR). Railway services were combined into two transcontinentals.

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32 Ron Brown, The Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, pg 15  
33 www.railways.incanada.net  
34 www.railways.incanada.net  
35 www.railways.incanada.net  
36 www.railways.incanada.net  
37 www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/trains/021006-1000-e.html