

Renfrew railway station survives the test of time

Being a train operator is the kind of job that sticks closely to schedule, but it is an agreeable line of work for two men who work as operators at the CP station in Renfrew.

Carl Baker and Blair Laidlow like the consistency of their jobs, and they also like being around trains. If they didn't they said, they would find the work dull.

Mr Baker and Mr Laidlow say they are not actually train fanatics, but they do have a certain fondness for trains.

"There's something about them," said Mr Laidlow, "They're in your blood."

His co-worker agreed. "I've been across Canada on the 'Canadian'. My wife and I have been to the west coast, and it's a trip everybody should take."

"When you get to the mountains it's beautiful."

The two men have been working around train stations for over 20 years, and most of that time was at the CP station in Pembroke.

Staff cut-backs there two years ago in Sept, 1975 forced them to re-locate to Renfrew, as the one remaining position in Pembroke was set aside for a man who had been there for

over 30 years.

Despite the fact they now work in Renfrew, however, Carl Baker and Blair Laidlow have not moved to town. They prefer to commute everyday from Pembroke, although the drive is an added headache in bad weather.

"The 70 miles a day round trip is a mental strain," said Mr Baker, "and the worst time for driving is now." In the fall there's fog and in the winter snow, he said.

"But none of us who have got bumped into Renfrew have moved here," he said.

Mr Laidlow and Mr Baker started at the Renfrew station in November 1975 when they were joined by two train dispatchers from Smiths Falls. These two men were displaced when the dispatcher's office there closed.

Now four operators work three eight hour shifts at the station, manning it 24 hours a day. One man works the "swing" shift, which covers the time between shifts. This usually includes an evening shift, two midnight shifts and two day shifts.

Their day-by-day workload depends on the number of trains that go by and this in turn

depends on a number of factors.

"Last night there were four trains down during the night," Mr Baker said Saturday afternoon.

"It varies you know; there's no set pattern. It depends on the number of trains running and the traffic."

A train operator's job, basically, is to pass along messages and information to train crews. These messages come from dispatchers at stations around Renfrew and are passed on to engineers by way of semaphore system.

The position of the two semaphore arms indicates whether the train crew has to stop for any messages, said Mr Baker.

"If both arms were down the train would have to stop" he said.

The system itself operates on the same basis as a traffic light, he said. Three colors inside the arms light up at night, with each meaning something different to railway men.

But you would have to know something about trains to understand the concept completely, he said.

For example, when a train arrives at the Renfrew station it has already received a signal

indicating whether there are any messages.

If there are, train operator Carl Baker or Blair Laidlow attach them to a wooden hoop and take them out to the platform.

Holding the long end of this hoop they wait for the engine to pull into the station. When it draws alongside they hold it out so the engineer can reach out from his cab and remove the messages with his hand.

After working on the railroad for a number of years you get to know the train crews.

"You get to know everybody by their first name," said Mr Baker, since most of the crew members are long term employees.

The Canadian passes through Renfrew twice a day; once on its way west and once on its way east. Westbound the train passes through Pembroke, North Bay, Sudbury, White River and Kenora, then through the Prairies and British Columbia.

Tickets are no longer sold at the counter in the station, although a metal wicket still decorates the station office. They can now be bought through a travel agency in Renfrew, through the station in

Ottawa or directly from a conductor on the train.

And people do prefer to ride by rail, said Mr Baker.

"There are more people using the train now that there were at this time last year," he said. "There are quite a few people taking the train."

And the idea to bring skiers into the valley on ski train is also a good one," he said.

"I think it's a terrific idea provided they run it when it suits the people," he said. "Any tourist promotion is a good idea."

His co-worker would also like to see more promotion for trains.

"They've got to do something to improve the service and get people back to it," he said.

"I don't actually use the trains that much," he said. "I'm an outdoorsman."

One of his favorite pastimes is snowmobiling, but snowmobiles can create delays for trains, he said.

When a snowmobiler drives on a track he packs down the snow beneath him due to the weight on a track his machine.

There are electrical connections underneath these tracks that could be damaged by packing the snow down too

hard, said Mr Laidlow, and a train could actually be lifted off the tracks by packed snow.

Driving on a railway track can also be dangerous, he said. "You wouldn't be able to hear the noise of a train behind you with a helmet on," he said.

But trains are fairly versatile, said Mr Baker, and they can run in most weather conditions.

"The only difference the weather makes on trains is the severe cold," he said.

Then the number of cars on the trains has to be reduced, because not enough air can be pumped through for the air brakes.

But trains are still worth looking at, said Mr Baker.

In Pembroke people would stop and watch the trains to by as they went grocery shopping, he said. And in Renfrew there are always a group of children watching the Canadian go by at the Renfrew Ave crossing.

"There's just something about a train that's fascinating," said Mr Baker.

And the Canadian is a train "par excellence," said his co-worker. "It's majestic looking with the dome and everything."

"It's part of our heritage."