

Book tells story of Cobourg's railroad-industry giant

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Beyond two grand homes on George Street, there's not much to show that Cobourg was once home to a giant in the railroad industry.

At least now, there's Ted Rafuse's book to tell the tale.

Wood Cars on Steel Lines: A History of the Crossen Car Companies, Cobourg, Ontario details the company and its work through all its names — Crossen Car Company, then Crossen Car Manufacturing Company and then Crossen Car Company of Cobourg Limited before they finally ceased operations.

Why they did so, Mr. Rafuse surmised, had to do with changes in technology.

"These were wooden cars," he explained. "Just before World War I, there were some major technological changes taking place in the whole rolling-stock industry in North America, and one of those was to go to steel.

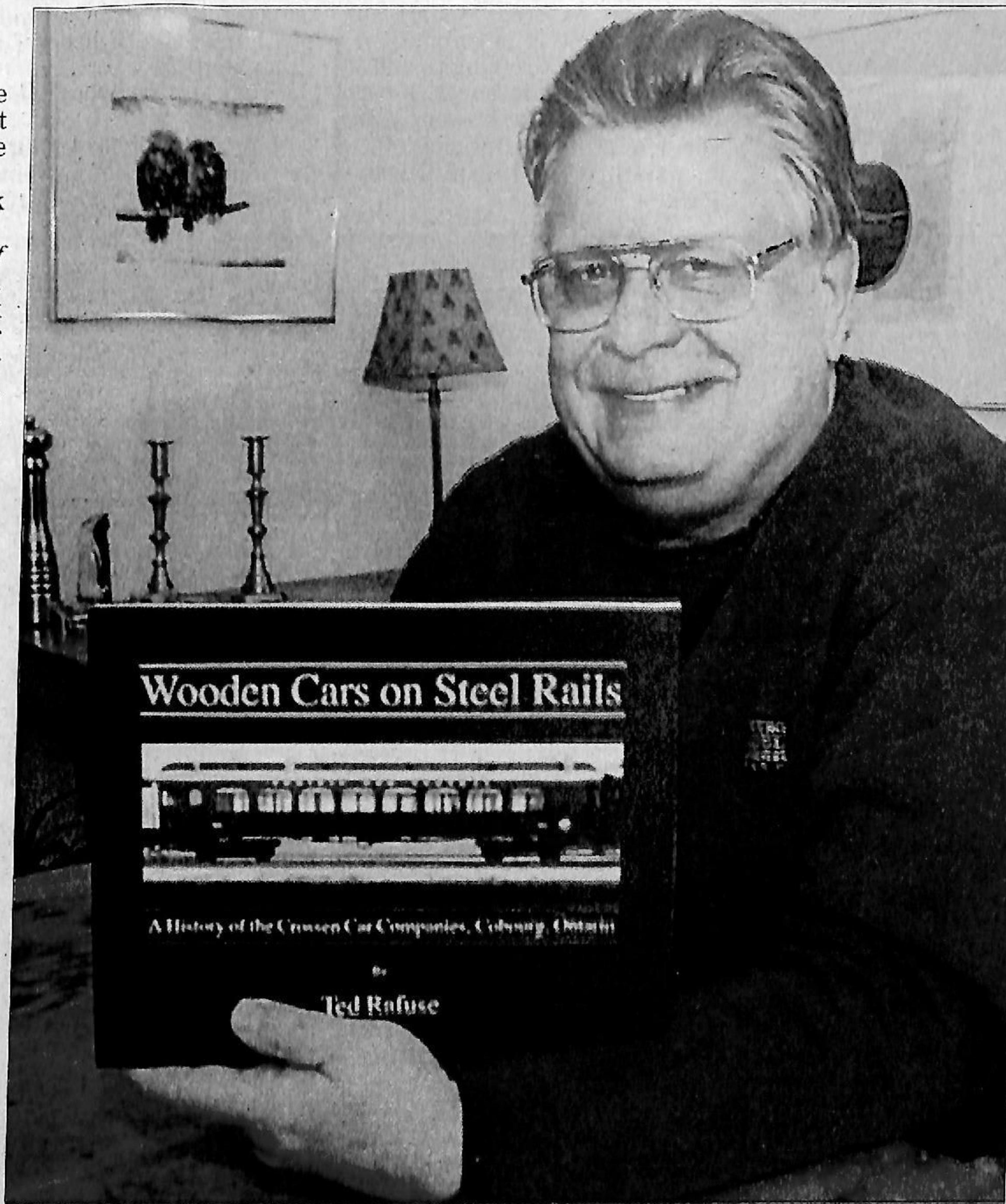
"At that time, Crossen was in his mid-50s and, I suspect, decided for whatever reasons not to get involved in raising the necessary capital to go that route. And he was living a very comfortable life."

Two of Cobourg's grand homes are remnants of the Crossen empire: the James Crossen home on the east side of George Street, built in 1871, and the one he built across the street for his son William as a wedding present in 1880.

"Why in that part of town?" the author asked rhetorically. "Simple — the more significant the person you were, the closer you lived to the work site."

Starting in the late 1870s, Crossen's complex occupied the lands now known as the old tannery. Mr. Rafuse suspects the big two-storey building that looks like an old home was probably the Crossen office building. All the other structures in that complex were built for the now-defunct tanning operations.

Mr. Rafuse is able to offer some biographical notes on the Crossen family. Patriarch James Crossen came with his family as a teenager from Ireland to New York City. They settled in Batavia, and James probably first came to Canada to visit an uncle who had settled in Camborne.



Ted Rafuse's new book chronicles the history of the Crossen Car Companies of Cobourg.

"He built for almost every railway in Canada between 1880 and 1910. From 1908 on, Canadian Northern Railways only used Crossen cars," Mr. Rafuse noted.

"Everyone had at least one or two Crossen passenger cars and probably scores of their freight cars. It became the largest independent manufacturer of

and Louisbourg coach number eight," Mr. Rafuse pointed out. "The trucks it rides on, on closer look, say, 'Crossen Car Company, Cobourg, Ontario.' That whole frame was cast in Cobourg. It's the only one I know of in Canada, since these other cars don't ride on their original trucks.

"The car on the cover also still exists, but more important, it still operates," he added. Labelled Prairie Dog Central, it's a tourist attraction near Winnipeg.

"A few years later, they restored it completely — it's wonderful," Mr. Rafuse said. "I rode it two years ago."

The photos show leaded-glass insets above the windows with brass baskets for hat boxes and small bags that would have come from the Cobourg foundry.

The light fixtures of crystal and metal hardware would also have been cast here, with the wood of the cars generally supplied from within 100 miles of Cobourg — white wood, ash, oak or walnut.

Photos of the private car of Canadian Pacific Railway superintendent William C. Van Horne show etched-glass transoms and a leather toilet seat. An odd wall fixture is actually a strike plate for matches, since Mr. Van Horne loved Cuban cigars.

Beneath the etched glass in a wooden door is the legend, "James Crossen Car Manufacturer, Cobourg, Ontario," in the sort of gold-leaf material with which banks used to write their names in their windows.

Along with photographs, Mr. Rafuse is pleased with the diagrams and floor plans he was able to get.

The company also built street cars, maybe about 66 of them, but Mr. Rafuse has focused on railway cars.

"I can account for more than 750 passenger cars and I don't know how many thousands of freight cars," he said. "The book includes a list of the passenger cars and as many freight cars as I can determine. It's the only history book of a Canadian rolling-stock manufacturer that I know of."

Mr. Rafuse has selected the March 5 Cobourg Model Railway Show as the place to launch his book, and he will be available to autograph copies at that time. The book is also available at The Avid Reader and Furby House Books.

"This car is from Nova Scotia, Sydney

PHOTO BY TED AMSDEN

