

# **North Bay in the 1950s and 1960s**

## **Stories by Michael Oldfield**

THE BEAST THAT ONCE BREATHED STEAM

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## **THE BEAST THAT ONCE BREATHED STEAM**

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When we are young, we take our surroundings for granted. Never does it occur to us that one day, much of what once was so familiar will be gone forever. Only in later years do we find ourselves yearning for the lost things of our past and that old saying, “You never miss the water till the well runs dry” comes back to haunt us. In my case, I hearken back to the early 1950’s and the twilight of steam railroading in North America. As a youngster, I had the joy of staring up at the great steam locomotives of the day and the privilege of actually riding in the cab on several occasions. The modern day diesel locomotive is nothing more than a large motor on wheels. It is clean, efficient and soulless. A steam engine, on the other hand, was a metallic monster that whispered and roared. Like a galloping steed or a charging elephant, you couldn’t take your eyes off it and, as all of us kids knew, deep inside that iron and steel hide lived a thing that breathed.

My Dad was a sheet metal worker for the Ontario Northland Railway and as a youngster, I would hike down to the railway yards after school to watch the small yard engines shunting boxcars around or stand gazing up at the massive steam locomotives which pulled the long winding freight cars or the shiny green coaches of a passenger train. For a kid such as myself, seeing one of these great steel beasts slowly coming to life, was an unforgettable experience. The engineer and the fireman would already be up in the cab with the engineer watching the steam pressure gauge climb as the fireman laboured away throwing shovel-loads of coal into the firebox. Being a fireman was back-breaking work but it was the only way to go if you wanted to be an engineer someday. At this point, the locomotive would be panting slowly and giving off occasional snorts like a bull pawing the ground before it charges. Eventually, the flames of the firebox heated enough water in the boiler, building up the required steam pressure to bring the sleeping dragon to life. The engineer cracked open the great throttle lever just a fraction and there was a deafening roar as the excess steam was blown out of the cylinders and the locomotive was enveloped in a misty white cloud. There would be two sharp toots of the whistle, the brass bell would start swinging on its U-shaped bracket and as the engineer opened the throttle some more, the cylinders would fill with steam, the pistons would push back the long driving rods and those enormous wheels would begin to roll forward. As more steam was applied, the smokestack

would belch forth white and then black smoke as fresh coal was added to the firebox. You could feel a tingle going up your spine as that thundering “chuff – chuff – chuff” filled the air and the ground beneath you vibrated from the movement of this mammoth on wheels. Off it would go down the track, pumping columns of smoke into the sky; the sound getting fainter and fainter until it rounded a bend and disappeared from view. Little did we know that one day all of the steam locomotives would chug away down the line and never return.

However, such depressing thoughts were far from my young mind because I had a mission in life. Just standing and looking at steam locomotives was O.K. but I wanted more. Call it the impossible dream, but I wanted to be up there in the cab and feel what it was like to actually ride the beast. This would not be an easy task. First of all, railway regulations forbade me from doing so; in fact, I should not even have been loitering around the yards and secondly, I was far too shy and polite to ask. Nevertheless, Dame Fortune smiled upon me one cold and frosty late afternoon in December as I stood talking to the hostler of one of the small yard locomotives. When a freight or passenger train had finished its run, the regular engineer and fireman turned the engine over to a hostler who emptied the firebox, cooled the boiler down by using up excess steam, then took the engine into the roundhouse and put her to bed. On the reverse side, they took the engine out of its nightly stall, got it filled with coal and water and got up a full head of steam before turning it over to an engineer to pull freight or passengers. Hostlers were named after the men who once took care of the horses at English coaching inns, making sure they were unharnessed, fed and watered. This particular hostler obviously didn't mind chatting with me as I frantically racked my brain trying to think of clever and intelligent questions to ask about steam locomotives. “Would you like to come up in the cab and have a look around?”, he asked me with a big grin. Would I???? It was like being asked by God whether I might care to have a quick look around Heaven with absolutely no obligation to stay! In a second, I was up that metal ladder and into the cab. I took a deep breath and inhaled the heady aroma of superheated steam, oil and grease. So this was it; this is where those larger-than-life men who drove steam engines lived. It was on such iron and steel stages that great drama had been played out; where, one dark and dreadful night, Casey Jones had turned to his fireman in those final moments and screamed, “Jump, Sim, Jump!!” as he desperately tried to stop his locomotive before it crashed into the rear of a freight train, taking his life. And now here I was, standing in such a place which was reserved for only a special few. The books on steam railroading I had obtained from the library gave me some indication of what I was looking at. Dominating the cab was the monstrous boiler

head and right below it was the firebox with its glowing coals. Stretching across the boiler was the huge throttle lever. This was the equivalent to a gas pedal in a car; this is what made the steam locomotive go. I was also able to identify the air-brake handle and the massive forward/reverse gear lever. On either side of the cab were small padded seats beside the windows, the left side for the fireman and the right side for the engineer. The rope which operated the steam whistle looped down just above the engineer's head. Everywhere I looked there were dials and gauges of every size and pipes running in every direction with small or large valves attached to them. My new-found hostler friend was very patient as he carefully explained the inner workings of the beast and some time later when I descended the ladder back down to where mere mortals lived, I knew that just one visit to that High and Exalted Perch would not be enough. Thus it was that I engaged more hostlers in conversation and was able to cadge more rides in steam locomotives in the following months. Some of the best rides involved taking a large freight or passenger engine down to the ash pit. I was allowed to sit in the fireman's seat and watch as a labourer....the lowest rung of the ladder in railroad circles....would ride on the cow-catcher and guide the hostler to slow down until the engine was positioned over the ash pit. The labourer would then yank on the big steel rods underneath the firebox and down would drop the red hot contents into the ash pit. With the firebox empty, the steam pressure would begin to drop and as soon as the firebox doors were closed and secured, we would move onto the turntable, again operated by the labourer, who would rotate us in a half circle until we were lined up with the right entrance door of the roundhouse and in we would roll. The hostler would make sure the coast was clear and none of the foremen were around before he gave me the O.K. to descend from the cab. Only once did I have the pleasure of getting an engine ready for a big run. The labourer already had a good fire going in the firebox when the hostler and I climbed aboard. We backed out onto the turntable, rolled off on the correct track and high-balled all the way down to the end of the yards. Here, the labourer climbed up on the coal tender and guided the coal chute into place before yanking on a rope which sent a roaring load of coal down upon us from the high coal shed. Then, we edged forward and the water pipe was swung over to fill the large water tank in the tender. Next, we moved to the sand shed and here the labourer had to stand on top of the engine itself and guide a pipe into one of the domes ahead of the cab where the sand, used for traction on slippery rails, was stored. Having filled up with coal, water and sand, we reversed our way back down to the other end of the yards and deposited the engine at the yard office where soon, the regular engineer and fireman would take this locomotive and couple on to their freight or passenger train.

Riding in the cab of a steam locomotive may have been a treat for a kid like myself, but for the men who toiled up there on a daily basis, it was a workplace with few creature comforts. Being open to the elements as they were, engine crews froze in the winter and roasted from the heat of the firebox in the summer. Wearing thick overalls and heavy gloves was a must if you didn't want to get burned by the firebox, the boiler or any of the steam pipes. Forward visibility was always a problem. It was like driving a car with an iron windshield. Both the engineer and the fireman had to lean out their side windows to see what was ahead. Imagine having to do this as you hurtle through a January snowstorm at 60 mph. and much of the romance of the rails disappears very quickly. Pushing a snow-plough which was nothing more than a caboose with a large blade attached to clear the tracks in the dead of winter added another set of blindfolds to the crew in the cab. At full speed, they could see nothing but a white blizzard ahead of them as the huge plough tossed snow high into the air. I once saw a locomotive come chugging into the yards that had just finished a long run pushing a snow-plough; it was so covered in ice and snow that it was barely recognizable and looked like a giant snow cone on wheels with smoke coming out the top.

But, foremost in their minds was the fear of a wreck and especially a head-on collision with another locomotive. *The Ballad of Casey Jones* may have been a fine old tune but it was a constant reminder to the men who rode the engines that death was never far away. Engineer Jones died when his locomotive crashed into a freight which had pulled into a siding but had left several cars out on the main line. Up until the installation of the block signal system in the early 1950's, horrific crashes on the line were always a possibility. What happened when an irresistible force met an immovable mass? Well, suffice it to say, you didn't want to be on board when it occurred. A high-speed collision between two steam locomotives was catastrophic and few survived. Those that did were usually thrown out of the cab by the tremendous force of the impact.

The causes of most wrecks were poor information passed on to train crews and sometimes, just bad judgement. Messages were sent up and down the line by a telegrapher's key and orders for an engineer to pull into Siding Number 23 and yield the main line to another train were passed up to the cab on small notepapers called flimsies as the train rolled through the station where the message had been received. Sometimes the messages were unclear; sometimes the engineer

thought he had time to make it up the track to the next siding before pulling off the main line. If he miscalculated, he might round a bend and find a thundering express train bearing down on him. Such a wreck happened on the Ontario Northland Railway on New Year's Day, 1948. Two crewmen died, one was badly injured and the story became part of the folklore of that area. Nowadays, with the new signal system, railway tracks are divided into quarter-mile blocks with traffic lights to guard them. Should an engineer see three red lights showing ahead of him, he brings his train to a stop and does not proceed into the next block until those lights turn green.

Beginning in 1825 when inventor George Stephenson's "Locomotion" carried 450 people along a rail line in England at 15 mph., the public developed a great sense of awe, wonder and endearment for the steam engines that pulled the trains. The old folk and country songs of bygone days told of *The Wreck of the Old '97*, *That Little Red Caboose Behind the Train*, *The Hobo's Lullaby* and *My Dad's the Engineer*. Even in the early 1960's, when I was first doing audio on country music shows at our local TV station, tunes such as *The Orange Blossom Special* and *The Wabash Cannonball* were still very popular. Would such songs ever have been written about clean efficient diesel locomotives? Never. It was those snorting, chuffing, pounding steam-breathing creatures that captured our imaginations from the moment we first beheld them. Even our Grade Three storybook had a gripping tale called *The Night Express* in which a brave engineer risked his life in order to save his train and its passengers and I read it time and time again. As kids, we would always wave as the engine roared past and the engineer or fireman would always wave back at us. Nothing was quite as plaintive or haunting as that far-off lonely call of the steam whistle in the night. I could lie in my bed and tell if it was a Canadian Pacific or a Canadian National locomotive approaching from a distance just by the sound of their whistles. Maybe Johnny Cash had the same experience when he was a kid which led him to write so many songs with railroad themes such as *Folsom Prison Blues*.

My particular fascination for these big machines never left me and in later years, as I did a bit of traveling, I had an opportunity to see some of the "stars" of steam railroading. At the Carnforth Museum in the north of England, I laid my hands upon the driving rods of "The Flying Scotsman", once the fastest engine in the world that had set a new speed record as it traveled from London to Edinburgh in the early 1930's at over 100 mph. In Cheyenne, Wyoming, I stood marveling at the towering size of the articulated locomotive called "Big Boy" which had been built for the Union Pacific Railway in the 1940's to carry their ultra-long munitions trains over

the steep grades of the Continental Divide all the way to the east coast where their goods were bound for the war in Europe. It was a real thrill to see these giants up close yet it made me sad that I never had nor ever would see them in action. Obviously, I am not alone in my yearnings, for although they may have disappeared from the main lines of our railways, preserved steam locomotives which take tourists on short excursions are to be found all over the British Isles and North America. Even though thousands of these iron workhorses have already gone to the scrap yard, we do not wish them to become extinct. Like the Bengal tiger or the grizzly bear, we want to preserve these noble metallic creatures.

We may talk about The Glory That Was Steam but, in reality, many of us are just trying to hang onto something that we remember fondly from our childhood. They were a part of the life we once knew and to see one of them now sitting in a city park, frozen in motion and frozen in time, just seems wrong somehow. Who wants to see a great racehorse once it has been stuffed and mounted? We want to see it alive, breathing and running free. So it is with locomotives; they were never meant to be museum pieces. Youngsters of today who climb up inside the cab of these preserved relics will never know the thrill I once had of seeing the firebox glowing red hot, hearing the steam hissing or feeling the metal plates beneath my feet quiver as the monster began to breathe and the great iron wheels rolled forward. Do any of them fantasize as I once did of sitting in that hallowed right-hand seat in blue overalls and grey striped engineer's cap with my gloved hand gripping the throttle as I drove my own night express down the line at full speed? Those were my youthful dreams and memories and I was very lucky to have been in the right place at the right time, just as the Great Age of Steam was drawing to a close and to have experienced for a few brief moments what generations of railroad crews had felt as they shoveled coal into the fiery heart of the beast, kept an eye on their pressure gauges and opened the throttle a little wider to send their black iron behemoth roaring through the darkness past villages and towns where old and young alike would stir in their beds at the distant steam whistle's wail and the approaching sound of thunder in the night.

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