

THE CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY'S (CNR) "ALGONQUIN ROUTE" 1915-1995

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ABSTRACT

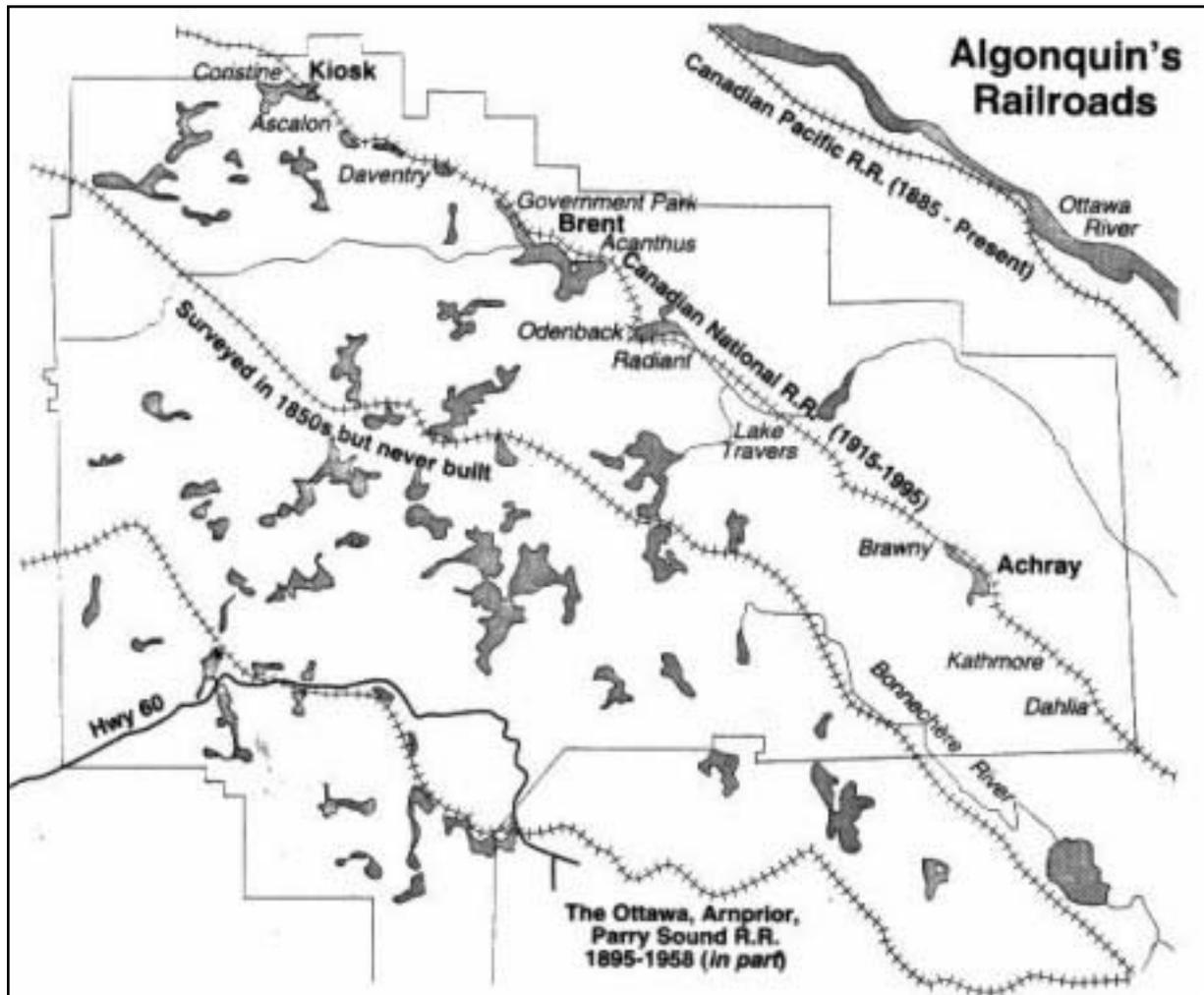
The Canadian Provincial Railway's (CPR) transcontinental rail line, completed in 1885, did not serve huge areas of Canada well. Entrepreneurs William MacKenzie and Donald Mann began to develop sections of railways across Canada as a part of a second service. They needed a direct route from Ottawa to Sudbury and developed a plan through the north side of Algonquin Park, and began to build it in 1912. By 1915 the trains began to roll and life changed along the way, where many locations of various sizes developed. Evocative names like Alderdale, Fossmill, Kilrush, Coristine, Kiosk, Ascalon, Odenback, Daventry, Brent, Acanthus, Radiant, Traverse, Brawny, Achray, Kathmore, and Dahlia were established. This line, the Canadian Northern, went bankrupt in 1918, and in 1923 became a part of the new Canadian National Railway (CNR). For 80 years plus a day, transcontinental trains passed through every day and local trains transported goods, local passengers and tourists to the various stops. The stories of these communities and the pain of their demise, along with the demise of the railway itself, is largely recorded. Past Forward, with the support of various groups and individuals, has begun to record some of the social history of the area for current and future generations. In our presentation we will summarize our progress to date, outline future plans, and highlight one location where the wounds have not yet healed completely.

INTRODUCTION: THE CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY'S "ALGONQUIN ROUTE" (1915-1995)

The CNR railway was built from Pembroke to North Bay as a part of its transcontinental line to eliminate the long trip via Toronto (Figure 1). The line traveled through 128km of the north side of the park close to several key lakes and crossing water 17 times. The line opened the north side of the park to business and pleasure but impinged on the pristine nature of the park.

The Canadian Pacific Railway had crossed Canada close to the U.S. border, but in the age of railways an additional northern route was needed. Entrepreneurs William MacKenzie and Donald Mann, established sections of such a line and needed a short route from Ottawa to Capreol. They originally tried to acquire J.R. Booth's Canadian Atlantic across the south side of the park but were outmaneuvered by the Grand Trunk. By 1912 they were building their Canadian Northern (Ontario) line through the north side of the park. It soon went bankrupt and was taken over by the Canadian National Railway.

Figure 1. Algonquin Park showing CNR Algonquin Route, CPR and Booth line in south of Park (Friends of Algonquin Park).



As a regional historian who lives near the line in Chisholm Township just west of the park, I developed an interest in the line and I have written about it extensively in a book and numerous newspaper articles (e.g., Mackey and Mackey, 1999; Mackey, 2003). The line was originally surveyed across the south end of Chisholm Township and across the south side of Lake Nipissing and some work was started on the construction of this route. The route was changed and pushed north to North Bay bisecting the township. The impact on the township was good from the point of view of economics, but some farms were cut up and people were inconvenienced by the constant traffic, crossings, accidents, train wrecks, and noise.

The CNR created numerous stops along the way where line maintenance crews were located. Some of these stops like Fossmill, Kiosk and Brent developed as lumber and tourist centres. Kiosk (Figure 2), Brent and Achray remain as access points and camp sites in the park today. Each of the fascinating names on the line evokes some interesting history (Cristine, Ascalon, Daventry, Acanthus, Odenback, Radiant, Brawny, Kathmore, Dahlia).

The three stops in Chisholm Township were no exception. A community developed around Alderdale and it became a centre of community activity. Farmers and travelers used Wasing Station regularly and Fossmill developed into an active lumber village. My son and I wrote a book on Fossmill and produced a video that tells the in-depth story of the life cycle of the community (Mackey and Mackey, 1999). Fossmill had its own logging railway which penetrated 20km into the park touching Manitou and North Tea Lakes.

Because of the limited space here I draw your attention to a couple of references that may be of interest. As a columnist for the *North Bay Nugget's Community Voices* regional supplement, I have written numerous articles on the line all of which, with photos, are available online at www.pastforward.ca.

When Fossmill burned and died in 1934 Sydney Staniforth, the driving force behind the company in Quebec and at Fossmill, established his own company at Kiosk in 1936. Most of the management team and many of the workers came from Fossmill. In the early days of Kiosk there was no family accommodation so the men stayed in bunkhouses and traveled home to Fossmill on the one day off that they had each week. The abandoned stop at Coristine, just over the Amable du Fond from Kiosk, was purchased by one family and used for years. This family had connections with the original Quebec operation, came to Fossmill and on to Kiosk, and three generations have worked at Columbia Forest Products in Rutherglen which was developed when Kiosk burned and died in 1973.

Figure 2. Aerial photo of Kiosk in full operation (Doug Mackey).



Kiosk became the largest community and industrial complex in park history. The 1974 Master Plan for Algonquin Park did not want communities (or railways) in the park, so Kiosk and eventually the CNR line disappeared. The people at Kiosk fought hard to keep the community but they eventually failed. The government and the union relocated the workers, many of whom were women working in the veneer mill. Many went to Columbia Forest Products and many went to Tee Lake, Quebec, where the three Staniforth sons were managers of Booth's operation.

The people of Kiosk meet annually to maintain their friendships and remember their past. In 2003 they remembered the 30 years since the fire and several Staniforths and some cottagers attended. My son and I have attended many of these reunions and we have made several presentations and mounted displays. Research has been completed for a book and video on Kiosk through *Past Forward*, an enterprise that we operate to conduct historical research.

Our Kiosk research looks at the life cycle of logging history at Kiosk going back to the 1870s when William Mackey took out squared timber and later saw logs from the Lake Kioshkoki and Amable du Fond watersheds. The CPR through Eau Claire served Mackey's sawmill until 1902 when the operation was taken over by J.R. Booth.

Booth's Kiosk operation with its cookery, bunkhouse, office and warehouse was in mothballs and it, and Booth's limits, were taken over by Staniforth in 1936. Kiosk evolved remarkably under Staniforth's leadership and through the latest technology and progressive planning.

The demise of the Algonquin Route came about for a number of reasons one of which was the coincidence of the Kiosk fire when the Master Plan was developing. Tourist lodges had failed and passenger service was curtailed. The railway was not making money so the CNR finally abandoned it and pulled up the rails 80 years, almost to the day, after it was opened.

There was considerable discussion over the potential use of the railbed in Chisholm Township. The farmers fought with the trail people and lost. Other sections have plans but the park section seems to be going back to nature in spite of some efforts to use it for hiking and biking and other recreational purposes. The CNR's Algonquin Route is a fascinating social and economic story full of success, failure, change and reparation, and it's not over yet.

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