

# A Nexus With The Past

## The Chance Meeting of a Man, a Train and a Station

By: Robert & Marco Marrone

We stood waiting for a train that hadn't come around these parts in more than forty years. It was a bright Sunday morning in July 2003, the place was Bolton, Ontario, and the train was the CPR Empress.

The iron horse, scheduled to pass the setting of the one-time Bolton station, was late, and the cameras we'd brought along remained latched on to us for a whole hour.

But soon enough, through the rustling brush and morning birds, an unmistakable sound cracked the bright blue sky. It was wraithlike and absurd to hear it now on this section of mainline, where modern diesels go through their daily machinations of hulling freight. Yet, somehow, it didn't seem so out of place. Anyone born after they stopped running could tell you exactly what it was: A steam train.

After the whistle blew, a good minute of silence followed and then a clickity-clack forged in the distance. The sound gradually swooned harder and faster, intensifying as "2816" appeared and rounded the bend.



*2816 approaching and passing Bolton station in July 2003.*



He looked like any other aging enthusiast but he wasn't. "My daughter dispatched this train," he said. "She called me a couple of minutes ago, telling me it was on its way by." If that alone were not enough to grab our attention, then what he said next did. "I used to be the station agent here," he uttered, rather modestly, referring to the building that once graced the gravel crackling underneath our feet.

"My name is John Barton." He would say his name twice to make himself understood.

All its parts shone, reflecting sunlight like the tracks before it. In the instant, the ground shook, and it felt like a heard of rushing buffalo as it came within a few feet of us. Our cameras were put through the wringers from the second the train emerged till it turned to a singular point in the horizon where all tracks seemed to converge. And just like that it was gone. Back to western Canada. Water spots speckled the tie plates evenly as if the big machine had left footprints, and a quarter we had placed on the rail had been flattened thin, utterly defaced: The Queen, too, was gone.

We scurried back to our car thinking that if we were quick enough we might catch up to it in Palgrave, a town just north of Bolton. But our quick departure was interrupted. Standing in front of us was a white haired man with fragile knees and a convincing smile. We hadn't noticed his car pull up just when "2816" had turned the bend.

With clasped hands he shared a few words with us. But the Empress would soon be in Palgrave and we had to make a brusque exit. Quickly, we got his telephone number and promised to call; and sounding unwittingly poetic we told him, "We must go, we have a train to catch."

We sped northward to the small town. With little traffic we thought we had a chance to get there before it did. At an undulating clearing we parked and slogged through foot high grass to the area of the mainline. But on the tie plates, under the shadow of a bridge, the same water markings were there, slowly evaporating in the warmth of the morning air. We had missed it.

Weeks later, at his home in Bolton, John Barton's wife, Martha, opened the door when we came knocking. Their tiny dog danced between our shoes while she invited us in;

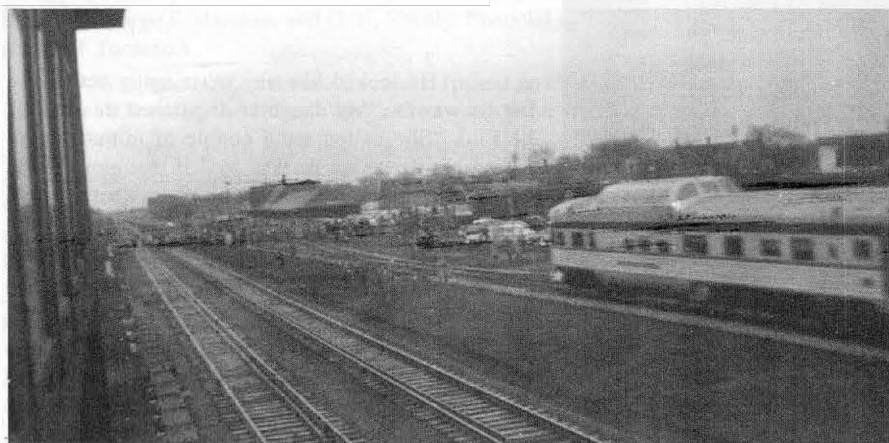
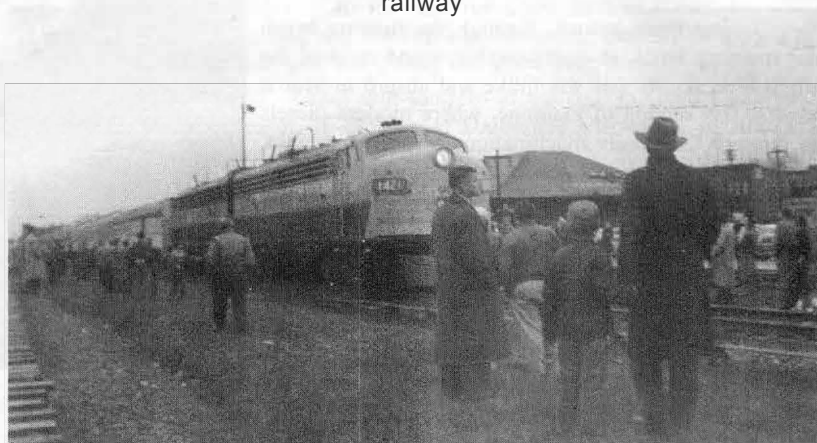


*Three views of the inaugural run of The Canadian as photographed by John Bart on at West Toronto on April 24, 1955.*

Leaside station, then worked at West Toronto - first on the diamond and then the station itself. Here, he witnessed the inaugural run of *The Canadian* in J 955. Later, in J 963, he became the agent in Bolton.

Bolton has always been a major supply center for the surrounding farming community. In 1882, the CPR bought the Toronto Grey and Bruce railway and the Credit Valley railway. Since both Lines ran a similar route in the area, the railway

she is gracious and soft spoken like her husband. The house is their daughter's, the one who is the youngest of five children, the CPR worker who dispatched the empress. John was quick to remember us, his mind is sharp, though he is hard of hearing and has a sluggish gait from his bad knees. He sat us down with piles of photographs and stories. Above, on the wall behind the chair he was sitting, was a family portrait decades old with the five children, his wife, and himself, of course, looking serious in that one picture with his eyes not quite on the lens as if his attention were focused on some other object beyond the camera.



He was born in 1922, in England, and immigrated to Canada at fifteen. In Gormley, Ontario, he worked on a farm, and later obtained a job with General Steelwares in Toronto. He eventually enlisted in the army during the Second World War. He learned telegraphy and became a wireless operator with the occupational forces. He was stationed in Italy and latter Holland, where he met Martha. In 1946, he retired from the armed forces and returned to work at General Steelwares. But he wanted a new challenge, so he enrolled in the Cassan Systems School and trained as a station agent. By 1950, the Canadian Pacific Railway hired him despite the injured hand he had suffered years earlier. He started as a relief agent at

discarded portions of one and segments of the other to form a new route. By the early nineteen hundreds the CPR built the Sudbury extension [the Mactier Subdivision] to this line and a new station replaced the original, which stood a few kilometers west. The Bolton station remained in use until 1986, where it was soon after decommissioned and boarded up.

When John Barton got there it became the family home. They had a unique living arrangement with the railway: in exchange for maintaining the station, the Bartons had part of

the building as their personal living quarters to which the CPR covered the cost of utilities. Along with the responsibilities of being a husband and father, he sold tickets, sorted freight, and hooped orders to passing trains. It was hectic from early morning to supertime, especially in the 1960s. There was even a dispatching service for the ambulance and volunteer fire department. Familial life was intertwined with the business of railways, and family members often helped out. Martha helped with the express as well as operating the dispatch service. "It was a difficult place to keep clean," she remembers, "from all that dust and diesel fuel from the tracks."



ABOVE: Bolton station just before it was demolished in 1992.



LEFT: John Barton "hooping up" orders to CP 5999 at Bolton station on July 3, 1986.

BELOW: John Barton (far right), Martha Bolton (third from right) with friends at Bolton station.

streamed by, it was if he were seeing an old friend that had dropped by to say hello, a visit foretold by his daughter. In his shine, he was as wraithlike as the whistle itself—a chink in time, a flavour of old.

Gerilee was the youngest. She was born and raised there, and simply saw the place as home. She was there, watching and photographing, when the railway finally flattened the place in 1992. The old family homestead is romanticized in a Wentworth Folkens print that hangs in her living room. She and one other sibling, Ron, took to careers in the railway.

When asked about life with the CPR, John says it was a good company to work for, but he holds no particular sentiment for it as he does his other passion, the Boys Scouts of Canada, where he gave much of his time. Yet, there was that unmistakable smile he bore that morning when the Empress

