

# THE "SAMSON"

GRACE MCLEOD ROGERS

THE oldest Canadian locomotive now in existence is the "Samson", Nova Scotia's pioneer steam-engine, employed in 1839 at the Albion Mines, the first locomotive to run over steel rails in British North America.

Soon after the discovery of the coal-fields in Pictou County, the Albion Colliery district was leased to a British Company, who sent out in 1827 Mr. Richard Smith, a skilful engineer and a gentleman of science, with machinery and colliers, the development of the mines being under his direct management. Several shafts were opened up, the deposits proving to be extraordinarily rich and extensive, in one bed alone the main seam being three feet six inches thick. Great quantities of coal were raised daily, and conveyed in trucks over a little railroad four miles in length, drawn by horses, from the pit-mouths at Stellarton to the old loading-ground below New Glasgow. From there the cargoes of coal were shipped by lighters and steamboat to the large sailing vessels at the mouth of the East River, and thence to sea. But the slow and laborious process of hauling the truckloads by horse power proved all too inadequate for the increasing output; and, eager for greater production, Mr. Richard Smith began to look about for more efficient transportation.

Reports had reached Nova Scotia of the successful working of Stephenson's "wonder-engine" in England, of Cooper's "Tom Thumb" in the United States. Also upon a short wooden-strap road in Quebec province, between LaPrairie and St. John's, the first railway to be built in Canada, a locomotive was being satisfactorily operated. This knowledge emboldened those in charge at the Albion Mines to employ the "iron-horse" at their colliery, and an order for the new invention was sent over to Robert Stephenson and Son, at Newcastle-on-Tyne.

The engine, "Samson" by name, was brought to Nova Scotia in a sailing vessel, taking six weeks in passage. Including its wooden frame, it was about twenty feet long, and of a total height of ten feet, without the stack which mounted another four feet above the frame. With it came also the rolling-stock, and the parts of two other engines, the "Hercules" and "Hibernia", but the "Samson" was the first one set up. Accompanying them was an engineer, Mr. George Davidson, a sturdy skilful Scotsman, from Newcastle. Also came the fireman, David Floyd, from Meath in Ireland; and Mr. Patrick Kerwin was conductor.

It was an event long remembered in the countryside when the marvellous contrivance was finally erected and set out on its initial run. Little Margaret Kerwin, the conductor's daughter, was a passenger on this trial trip.

"Maggie shall have the very first ride on the steam-waggon," he fondly cried, as they were about to start away; and snatching up the winsome little maid from out of a group of wondering folk crowded about the platform, he put her within the small caboose and carried her down to New-town-Glasgow and back, a never-to-be-forgotten ride to the child, John Gilpin's, and the famous one from Ghent to Aix, not a circumstance in comparison. To the end of her long life she proudly cherished the memory that she was the first passenger in Nova Scotia to travel upon Nova Scotia's first locomotive train; and though she had many another behind the "Samson", and long and luxurious ones on other lines, as life went on, there is an indefinable charm and interest about first experiences, and no other journey for her was ever so wondrous or thrilling as that four-mile transit to the old loading-ground, behind the magical iron-horse.

A few days later, upwards of two thousand people gathered for the "Grand Opening", not only from the region round about, but from many distant parts of the province; members of parliament and distinguished officials from the capital being especially invited guests of the management. By coach and gig, by chaise and boat, afoot and on horseback, they journeyed thither, even farm trucks and hay carts being utilized as conveyances, nobody staying away who could by any means be present for the auspicious occasion.

Many had regarded the new transportation scheme as an unlikely success, predicting a speedy return from this "new-fangled contraption", as they styled it, to the old cart-horses that had performed the labour surely, even if slowly. But the *steam-waggon* ran off as smoothly as if by magic, and all day long carried passengers, free, up and down the little line, the small car and trucks packed to capacity; sceptics and critics thrilled with excitement over their rides, speedily converted into enthusiastic admirers and supporters.

A gorgeous procession was an especial feature of the celebration. The horses brought up from out the mines, a private string furnished from the stables at "Mount Rundle", the spacious estate of the Railway Company, and the truck horses that had formerly hauled the coal, all of them groomed and curried till their coats shone like silk, led the parade. Upon every beast sat a rider astride a gay coloured saddle-blanket, clad in white trousers and jockey jacket, with tassalled caps of blue, and multicoloured sashes

streaming to the breeze. Following the horses came the "Mount Rundle" coach-and-four and wagonette-and-span, containing the chief officials of the day: while next in line were marshalled all the bands that could be requisitioned for the festive event, playing lustily and loud, the whole procession winding its way to "New-town-Glasgow", accompanied the entire distance by lively cheering throngs.

After this pageantry came a feast, a unique and memorable one indeed. Preparations for it had been going forward for days, the settlers from all the nearby sections bringing bounteous store of provisions, plain and wholesome, the Colliery Company furnishing great hampers of special delicacies brought from Halifax and Truro. A huge brick-oven, with capacious accommodation, was built upon the ground near by the Inn, skilful cooks baking within it all day long a continuous run of pastries and breads. Butter came in by bushel loads, milk by the cask. Potatoes in great iron pots were boiled over open fires.

But the pièce de résistance of the feast was an enormous ox, stuffed with savory dressing, and roasted whole, barbecue fashion, suspended upon a giant *cheep-lah-quah-gan*, a cross bar upon stout forked hardwood poles, set deep within the ground; the huge carcass hanging directly above an immense bed of glowing coals, so high above the reach that ladders placed against the posts had to be climbed to baste the cooking meat with butter and drippings from out big dishes beneath it, the delicious aroma of the roast spreading for miles around, it was averred, whetting the appetite long ere the feast was spread. After judicious cooking the great carcass was taken down, expert carvers slicing and portioning it out, the first and most luscious cuts to the invited guests; then sent freely forth everywhere among the multitude, so bounteous the serving that it seemed the "more they gave away the more they had." Of the other viands, rich and tasty, there was also an inexhaustive supply, and they did all eat and were filled.

It had been expected that a band of Indians would be present. Pictou County had been headquarters for the red men in the old days before Frenchmen and Scot invaded the district, a meeting centre for wars, and pow-wow. Many still remained throughout the township, and word had been sent around for them to attend the festivities. But it was not until the feast was well nigh concluded, that the dusky guests appeared upon the scene, a hundred and more in number, braves and squaws, gorgeous in gala attire, the males bedecked in skins and furs and feathers, the women garbed in bright coloured tunics atop their dark cloth skirts, vests of brilliant dye, and high peaked caps decorated in bead work; bringing as

gifts to the officials at the colliery ornamented birchens of bark, and baskets of finest weave.

With them they carried also bundles of torches, the making of which had been the cause of their delay, for the white man's axe and fires had thinned the forests round about their encampments, so that great distances had to be traversed to secure trees large enough in girth for barking of the thick wide strips which, fashioned into a fluted mass, and bound upon stout cleft sticks, would blaze for hours. The Micmacs were famous torch makers, and in those early times were frequently employed to furnish them for outdoor lighting. The belated guests were bountifully feasted, and given a ride upon the magic-waggon, with promise of future transportation free, in perpetuity, for all the tribe.


Then started the crowning event of the day, a great Ball, with the dusky faced dwellers of the forest, by special arrangement of the management, leading off for the grand-march, in one of their own mystic measures of dance; their lighted torches held on high; steps and movements full of wild grace and rhythm; their chanting song accompaniment, in that soft Micmac voice, with cadence like the sighing winds through tree tops high, hauntingly strange and sweet, and long remembered by the assembled throngs.

Thus the Ball was opened, and the dancing began in earnest—at the Inn, on erected platforms, in green fields, down shady highways. Not a fiddle or bag-pipe, from Cape John to Garden-of-Eden, was unemployed that night, sounding out jigs and reels and strathspeys, hornpipe, clog and stately minuet; and clad in silks and homespun, in calico and muslin, in satin shoes and sarsanet, in hobnail and mocassin, the blithe throng chased the glowing hours with flying feet.

Silver glowed the stars, golden shone the moon, soft blew the summer zephers—on went the dance—

Up and down the country road,  
In and out the Eagle.

All night long the revelry continued, and not till the red sun rose above the eastern pines did the last merry makers seek their homes. In all our country's annals, where was ever another such joyous occasion to match this jocund festival in honour of the iron-horse that had come to Albion's colliery.

For many succeeding years the "Samson" carried the coal trains from mouth-pit to loading-ground, puffing, proud, and mighty in strength; but eventually, by new and improved inventions deposed from its first importance and usefulness, it was set aside and its place was taken by larger structures, more fitted to the increasingly heavy output from the mines. 

At the time of the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, it was sent on there as an exhibit of the earliest locomotive erected and operated in the Maritime Provinces; and was most fittingly accompanied thither by Mr. Davidson, the Scottish engineer who had first set it up and run it.

After the Fair was over, the old engine was reported missing, side-tracked somewhere, in transit, it was supposed; or through lack of proper oversight disposed of with unclaimed exhibits; perhaps absorbed into the Chicago railways and broken up. Official enquiry elicited no information. The old locomotive could not be found, was mourned as lost, and for a long period of years was forgotten.

But the "Samson" had not been scrapped. In 1928, when the Baltimore-and-Ohio Railroad was making preparation for its mammoth Centennial Exhibition, it became known to some journeying provincialist, who had friends upon the Baltimore and Ohio Board, that the long lost locomotive was in possession of that Road, and was catalogued for their exhibition, among a collection of ancient "motivity".

This information was conveyed to the Hon. E. N. Rhodes, then premier of the province, and he and his Government became at once interested in having the engine brought back to Nova Scotia. Negotiations were opened up with Mr. Daniel Willard, President of the Baltimore-and-Ohio Road, presenting the proposition that so interesting a relic of early railroading should be returned to the province where it had its first triumphal working. This proposal met with most sympathetic and friendly consideration, and the reply was prompt and generous. The "Samson" had been in an alien land, but not with Philistines, for a hearty and generous proffer of the old relic was made to the Nova Scotian Government by the President and Directors of that Road.

Thus, after much roughing about, gallantly escorted to the border by the Baltimore-and-Ohio, as gallantly taken in charge there by the Canadian National, the "Samson" returned to its native heath; shorn of its primal importance, but by the pomp and circumstance of its journey thither, and the public acclaim upon its arrival, somewhat avenged for the long neglect and usurpation.

Eventually this little old progenitor of the vast system of steam transportation that now traverses the Dominion may get permanent preservation in the New Archives Building lately presented to the province by W. H. Chase, Esquire—but at present it is housed in the Rotunda of the Canadian National Terminals, at Halifax, gathered unto its fathers, as it were, an object of great historical interest to the travelling public.