

Connecticut's "other railroad": Central Vermont

This charming Canadian National subsidiary somehow always seemed to be "a generation behind" its parent and neighbors

GROWING UP IN CONNECTICUT in the 1960's, it was easy for a young railfan to believe the New Haven was the world's only railroad, since by early in the century, NH had purchased or leased just about every rail company in southern New England. One that escaped its tentacles, though, was the 350-mile Central Vermont Railway, which quietly ran through the eastern part of the state, reaching tidewater at New London.

My first opportunities to watch this "other railroad" came in 1967, when a new job assignment took my Dad to Stafford, on the CV a few miles south of the Massachusetts border, and I would visit his office. Although CV was freight-only by then, many stations remained open, and I'd occasionally spend a vacation day with the patient Stafford operator C. A. Lacompte.

Central Vermont was a Canadian National subsidiary, and it remained so until its sale to short-line conglomerate RailTex in 1995. Through its final years, CV remained a well-kept property whose rolling stock still resembled U.S. roads of a decade earlier. CV was the last major New England railroad to run steam, and its diesels were from early generations.

The CV's south end of my youth dated to 1848 origins as the New London Northern, but the "real" Central Vermont was to the north, territory I would come

The "independent green" era is in vogue on September 3, 1993, as train 444 approaches S4 switcher 8081 as it eases into White River Junction behind two ex-passenger GP9's bracketing two ex-DW&P RS11's with a freight GP9 trailing.



TWO PHOTOS, SCOTT A. HARTLEY

to know better once I learned to drive.

CV predecessors had envisioned a Boston-to-Great Lakes route passing through Vermont. The Vermont Central Railroad reached from the Connecticut River town of Windsor, Vt., up through White River Junction and the Green Mountains to the Lake Champlain waterfront at Burlington. At its east end, the VC interchanged with early Boston & Maine predecessors to reach Boston.

Meanwhile, John Smith of St. Albans was building his Vermont & Canada from Burlington north to the Canadian border, and across the upper waters of Lake Champlain to Rouses Point, N.Y. There, a connection was made with the 118-mile Northern Railroad of New York, to the St. Lawrence River at Ogdensburg. By 1850, Vermont Central and Vermont & Canada teamed up to offer through Boston-Ogdensburg serv-

CV passenger service is a decade gone as two former passenger GP9's roll into Three Rivers, Mass., with local 743 on August 18, 1978.

ice, via their connections.

Smith soon gained control of the VC/V&C, and the company would stay under the family's leadership for three generations, until 1932. Headquarters were in the family's hometown of St. Albans. Brick locomotive and car shops were built, and a three-story office building and passenger station, with a 350-foot, four-track trainshed, went up in 1866. The shed was removed in the early 1960's, but the station was Central Vermont's general offices until the end.

Vermont Central built 100 route-miles into Quebec, reaching the final few miles into Montreal on trackage rights. To the south, VC leased lines to connect with the New London Northern, which it soon controlled. The nearby Rutland Railroad also came under VC direction.

VC ran trains from Montreal to New London, and offered New York City connections on NLN steamboats, which lasted until 1946. Smith also leased the line to Ogdensburg and its eight steamers, giving VC access west to Chicago.

As early as 1863, Vermont Central pledged bonds to Canada's Grand Trunk Railway as payment for its portion of expenses of a Midwest-New England freight service. VC became the Central Vermont Railroad during a reorganization in 1873. It declared bankruptcy in





CV's April 28, 1963, employee timetable sported this system map and new logo on the back cover.

1896 and soon gave up its leases of the Rutland and the Ogdensburg line. GT became owner of two-thirds of the stock of the new Central Vermont Railway in 1898, and the company remained under Canadian control for nearly a century.

GT was one of several railways to be included in the government's creation of Canadian National in 1922, and Central Vermont (as well as Grand Trunk Western and Duluth, Winnipeg & Pacific) would remain as U.S. wards of the big Canadian transcontinental system. Over the years, CV's local operating autonomy increased or diminished in accordance with directives from CN's Montreal headquarters. In 1971, CN placed its three U.S. roads under the umbrella of Detroit-based subsidiary Grand Trunk Corp.

In the modern era, Central Vermont was a classy operation. Well-maintained

track and white granite ballast (from a quarry at Swanton, Vt.) were trademarks of its single-track roadbed. A \$3 million rebuilding through Vermont after a 1927 flood modernized the north end, including high trestles soaring over the White, Winooski, and Lamoille Rivers on CV's climb over the Green Mountains.

After World War II, CV abandoned its St. Armand Subdivision, which reached from Fonda Junction (just north of St. Albans) to the outskirts of Montreal at St.-Jean, Quebec. In its place, CV's freight and passenger trains utilized Canadian National trackage from East Alburgh, Vt., to Montreal.

Not much else changed. From 1900 onward, CV and B&M had combined their Connecticut River lines between White River Junction and East Northfield, Mass. B&M dispatched the route until 1989, when control passed to CV. Centralized Traffic Control was in use between West River (just north of Brattleboro) and Windsor. Except for this segment and a few remotely controlled switches elsewhere, CV remained a non-signaled, timetable/train order railroad.

Branches included a line from St. Albans to the Canadian Pacific connection at Richford (abandoned in the 1980's); Essex Junction-Burlington (still active); Montpelier Junction-Montpelier-Barre (sold in 1958); East Alburgh to Rouses Point (this last remaining piece of the connection to the Ogdensburg line was abandoned in the late 1970's); and a couple of short stubs off the main near Norwich, Conn. (abandoned in the '80's).

In the 1950's, CV ran three passenger trains in each direction on its north end. The daytime *Ambassador* was a through Montreal-New York (Grand Central) train on a CN-CV-B&M-NH routing via Springfield, Mass. The overnight *Montrealer* (northbound) and *Washingtonian* (south) linked their namesakes via Hell Gate Bridge, New York's Penn Station, and the Pennsylvania Railroad. The nocturnal *Vermonters* was a St. Albans-White River Junction local with a sleeper for the *Washingtonian/Montrealer*.

Gas-electric car service on the downgraded line in Canada was gone by the early 1950's, and passenger service on CV's southern reaches, variously gas-electric cars and steam-powered mixed



FRANK QUIN; J. DAVID INGLES COLLECTION

CV steam resembled parent CN's. CV's newest engines were 10 1928 2-10-4's, but 465, switching at Waterbury, Vt., in the 1950's, wasn't much older, being 1 of 16 N-5-a 1923 Schenectady 2-8-0's.



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Train 744 halts at Palmer, Mass. on August 18, 1978, behind GP9's 4551 in original colors and 1776 in U.S. Bicentennial garb. The 1776, repainted from GT 4450 as a joint CV-Grand Trunk "Bi-cen" project, was ordered from EMD as GT 1776.

trains, disappeared by 1953. All of CV's through passenger service ended in 1966, although the then-new Amtrak would resurrect the *Montrealer* in 1972. In 1989 Amtrak rerouted the *Montrealer* so it ran the length of CV from New London north, the first passenger service on the Southern Division in 36 years.

Most of CV's freight was overhead traffic, with parent CN being the primary interchange in Montreal. Much traffic moved to and from the B&M at White River Junction. To the south, New York Central's Boston & Albany at Palmer, Mass., and New Haven at New London provided business.

In the '50's, there were two major through freights each way. One pair handled CN freight to and from the Midwest. Officially 490-491 between Brockville, Ont., on CN and New London, it was known as "the Dairy" because of the cattle and agricultural commodities carried. Montreal-New London trains 430-

429 were "the Paper Train" owing to the predominance of newsprint and other forest products from Quebec mills.

Because they ran over both CV and CN between Montreal and St. Albans, both roads' crews handled the trains. Most CV north-end on-line businesses were served by "the milk train," which ran between St. Albans and White River Junction. It would pick up cars of milk from the many Vermont creameries destined to Boston and southern New England points via B&M. Local freights operated between New London and Brattleboro and also covered the Vermont branches.

In the '60's the two big road freights were consolidated into one, and Penn Central's takeover of the New Haven in 1969 soon resulted in most of CV's former NH New London interchange being shifted to the former NYC at Palmer.

Before long, my boyhood Connecticut CV was down to just local freights to serve customers on the 65 miles south of Palmer. More of the old Southern Division took a hit in 1976, when CV and B&M began pool freight service between St. Albans and B&M's interchange with the new Conrail at Springfield, Mass. This service ran as a B&M operation south from White River, leaving CV road freights only north of that point. This agreement was canceled a few years later, and CV restored through service to Palmer, connecting there with

Conrail, CV's second largest interchange after CN. Substantial on-line business in eastern Connecticut also helped.

CV's latter-day steam was anything but modern. Like its diesels would, CV steam usually followed CN designs. The newest steam was acquired from Alco at Schenectady in the 1920's: 10 2-10-4's, 4 4-8-2's, 16 2-8-0's, and 8 0-8-0's. Steam from CN appeared on CV from time to time, but CV's light rail and bridges prevented the use of big power.

CV bought its first diesels, U.S.-built Alco switchers, in 1941. CN began assigning its new cab units (of three builders: GMD [EMD], Montreal [Alco design], and Canadian Locomotive Co. [Fairbanks-Morse]) to some of CV's freights in 1953. Steam finally ran its last on CV in spring 1957, as the road acquired 18 GP9's in CN olive green and gold. They arrived, in freight and dual-service configurations, at the same time as New Haven and B&M also were getting GP9's to replace their 15-year old first-generation road diesels. Yes, CV was again a generation behind! The CV Geeps frequently shared assignments with 16 EMD GP9's bought by CN but lettered "Grand Trunk" for its Montreal-Portland (Maine) line.

Beginning in the early '60's, the CV and GT GP9's adopted CN's new image with black hoods, red ends, and their own versions of CN's "wet noodle" logo on the hoods. In 1977, CV introduced its own independent forest green and yellow livery. Also in the late '70's, CN's propensity to swap diesels among its U.S. roads hit the CV, as some of the CV and GT GP9's went to the GTW, replaced by DW&P's 15 Alco RS11's. By

CV used wooden cabooses into the 1970's; 4014 is preserved on a tourist line at Waterville, Conn.



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the time RailTex bought CV, blue GTW GP38AC's and upgraded GP9's had replaced all of CV's older green power.

As with its engines, CV's cabooses remained a generation behind, as CV relied upon a small fleet of wooden cupola-style cars, complete with kerosene marker lights, for local services until 1972, when some new all-steel, extended-vision cars were purchased. Modern CN cabooses would carry the markers on CV's through freights into the 1990's!

The writing was on the wall, though, for in its final years, Central Vermont was moving only 30,000 cars a year, well under 100 cars a day for a 325-mile line. Local management tried innovative approaches for bettering the CV. A new auto distribution center was established at Sharon, Vt., and the "Rocket" piggy-back train, a lumber products unit train, a unit TankTrain oil operation, and a wood-chip train for a Burlington electric power plant all contributed to CV's bottom line. Despite mixed success on these endeavors, CN sought a buyer for the CV, and on February 4, 1995, the 98-year-old name disappeared as Texas-based RailTex bought it and changed the name to New England Central Railroad.

One reminder remains, however, as CN retained ownership of the CV reporting marks, and CN today is shopping old CV box cars. Look for them in revenue service across North America, smartly lettered with CN's website address below the CV logo. ■

Central Vermont fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1992)

Route-miles: 469; 366

Locomotives: 68; 20

Passenger cars: 128; 0

Freight cars: 3350; 223

Headquarters city: St. Albans, Vt.

Notable postwar passenger trains: *Ambassador*; *Montrealer*; *Washingtonian*

Recommended reading: *The Central Vermont Railway*, Robert C. Jones (Sundance Publications, 1981-82; Vols. 1-6)

Special interest group: Central Vermont Railway Historical Society, P.O. Box 8672, Essex, VT 05451-8672

Source: *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000).