

TH&B: a larger-than-life presence

A unique southern Ontario railway linked its two large parents, CP and NYC

Canada, thanks to its two transcontinental giants after 1923, had precious few small “regional” railroads to become the eventual “fallen flags” of fond recall and were found all over the United States. One, though, was the 111-mile Toronto, Hamilton & Buffalo Railway, which vanished in 1987.

Little TH&B had a larger-than-life presence that belied the reality of its being merely the southern Ontario stepchild that linked parents New York Central and Canadian Pacific. TH&B never realized its dream of being an independent road linking its three namesake cities, but in its heyday, it did haul sleeping cars from Toronto for New York, Boston, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. In 1911 it became the first North American railroad to install Absolute Permissive Block signaling; it erected a splendid art deco station and office tower in Hamilton; and it had Canada’s only Berkshire 2-8-4 steam locomotives, not to mention two ex-NYC J-1 Hudsons.

In 1890, even before a rail was laid, TH&B deviated from its chartered intentions, dropping Buffalo from its plans in favor of an eastern terminus and connection with the Canada Southern, a subsidiary of NYC’s Michigan Central, at Welland. In 1892, TH&B acquired its first operating trackage, the faltering 18-mile Brantford, Waterloo & Lake Erie, a Brantford-Waterford line that was extending itself to Hamilton.

As crews spiked TH&B rails from Hamilton to Welland, the line’s strategic importance attracted suitors. And not just anyone, for on July 9, 1895, the still-incomplete railway was sold to a consortium headed by two of the most powerful men in North American railroading:



Greg McDonnell

In historic TH&B turf, against the backdrop of Lake Erie and amid the vineyards at aptly named Vinemount, Geeps 76 and 77 roll the Port Maitland local west at 12:15 p.m. on March 29, 1982.

NYC’s Cornelius Vanderbilt and CPR’s William Cornelius Van Horne.

NYC, dividing its holdings with subsidiaries MC and CASO, took a 73 percent stake in the fledgling bridge line; CPR held the remaining 27 percent, an arrangement that would endure for 80-plus years. TH&B was afforded a considerable measure of autonomy, but parental influence from New York and Montreal gave little TH&B its unique international character.

The four owners agreed to funnel their bridge traffic and connecting passenger trade over TH&B, but even as the first passenger train left Hamilton for Welland on December 30, 1895, a key piece of the puzzle was missing: the “T,” for the railway had no way to Toronto.

CPR rode to the rescue in April 1896, negotiating trackage rights over Grand Trunk for 37 miles from Toronto to

Hamilton. Instead of fighting GTR and bearing the burden of building a parallel line to Toronto, TH&B needed only to build a 1.2-mile link between its line and the GTR main through Hamilton. By spring 1897, the double-track connection was complete, and through Toronto-Buffalo passenger service was inaugurated.

At first, CP, TH&B, and MC engines handled the passenger trains over home-road trackage, but by 1905, TH&B and MC were pooling power Hamilton-Buffalo. In 1912, CP joined in, and the six daily Toronto-Buffalo trains were handled by a triumvirate that saw NYC-family engines going to Toronto, CP locomotives in Buffalo, and TH&B engines going both directions from Hamilton.

TH&B’s fortunes, though, were tied to tonnage, and not just the lucrative bridge traffic for which it was built, but originating tonnage, much of it from



Harold K. Vollrath collection

Berkshire 202, a 1928 CLC product, posed at Hamilton in fall 1946.



Louis A. Marre collection

Hudson 501, ex-NYC 5311, left Buffalo, N.Y., on October 26, 1952.

Hamilton. Construction of the Belt Line loop in 1900, followed by the Short Belt Line and Grasselli Branch in 1911, gave TH&B direct access to Hamilton's burgeoning industrial lakefront, which was crowded with steel mills, foundries, and factories. TH&B also secured freight rights on interurban Hamilton & Dundas in 1897, and bought the line outright when passenger service ceased in 1923.

The new century brought TH&B a new direction, when in 1914 it took over the 14-mile Erie & Ontario, which went south from Smithville to Dunnville. The major impetus for its construction had been Dunnville's desire to break GTR's monopoly on local freight, but TH&B's sights were fixed on Port Maitland, 5 miles farther south, on Lake Erie. TH&B was not as concerned about competing with GTR for local traffic as it was about establishing a Lake Erie carferry service.

Toronto, Hamilton & Buffalo Navigation Co. *Maitland No. 1*, a 2,751-ton steamship with capacity for 32 cars, was launched in summer 1916, but spent her first four months on Lake Michigan leased to the Ann Arbor while TH&B's Port Maitland facilities were completed. On November 1, 1916, she assumed her intended role, departing the NYC docks

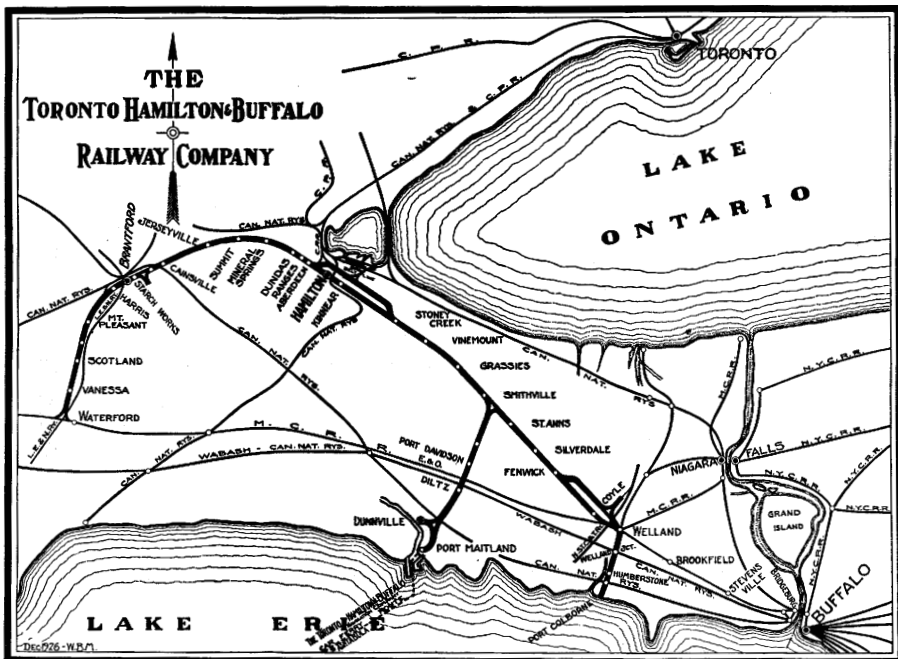
in Ashtabula, Ohio, with loaded coal cars billed to Hamilton steel mills.

Maitland No. 1 did a respectable trade—heavy on coal for Hamilton and newsprint for U.S. markets—but the service was short-lived. The market crash of 1929 and pending expansion of the Welland Canal convinced TH&B to withdraw from the cross-lake trade, and the boat made her last voyage under the TH&B flag on June 28, 1932, just weeks before the enlarged canal opened. She then ferried autos across Lake Michigan between Milwaukee, Wis., and Muskegon, Mich., during 1935-37, before giving up her engines for the war effort in 1942 and being cut down for use as a barge.

The TH&B locomotives that met the *Maitland No. 1* at the slip were not nearly as state-of-the-art. As World War I began, TH&B still operated the likes of construction-era 4-4-0's, secondhand 0-4-0's from Chicago's Union Stockyards & Transit Co., and three Baldwin Moguls built for (and rejected by) the Santa Fe in 1894. Ten-Wheelers and one Pacific were the pride of the passenger pool, and the biggest freight engines were seven hand-fired, 55-inch-driven Gs-class Montreal 2-8-0's.

After the November 1923 delivery of

TH&B



This map from a 1947 timetable shows the critical geographic position of the TH&B.

Fallen Flags Remembered



Two photos this page, Greg McDonnell

In November 1974, SW9 No. 55 eases a CB&Q boxcar (in 1960's pre-BN-merger colors) along a street in Dundas. TH&B's diesels forever kept their numbers and maroon-and-cream colors.

Montreal 4-6-2's 15 and 16, the largest and last locomotives built to TH&B design, the line addressed the need for bigger, faster freight engines for its hot CP-NYC overhead traffic. The first serious road trials were conducted in July 1927 with leased NYC H-10b Mikado 355, but when brand-new Boston & Albany A-1b 2-8-4 1433 hit the property in September, TH&B knew it had its locomotive.

The big Lima Berkshire could march up the 1.04 percent climb to Vinemount with twice the tonnage allotted to a Gs Consolidation. TH&B Motive Power Superintendent W. T. Kuhn quickly inked specs for two Berks to call his own.

TH&B As-class 2-8-4's 201-202, patterned after C&NW J-4's built by Alco in

1927 (customs duties made Lima-built copies of B&A 2-8-4's prohibitive), arrived from Alco affiliate MLW in July 1928. They would be Canada's only Berkshires, TH&B's first taste of Super Power, and its last new steam locomotives.

The Berks worked the hot *Starlight* night freight between Hamilton and CASO's Victoria Yard in Fort Erie (redirected in 1931 to MC's Montrose Yard in Niagara Falls, Ont.) for their entire careers, although MC crews were known to employ them on transfer runs over Suspension Bridge to the American side during their Montrose layover.

By World War II's end, TH&B needed a passenger engine to match the Berks' performance, because its Pacifics, the

youngest over 20 years old, were tired. In January 1948, NYC sent help: 18-year-old J-1d Hudsons 5311 and 5313. The Alcos became TH&B 501-502 and joined the Toronto-Buffalo passenger pool.

Even as TH&B men at Chatham Street roundhouse in Hamilton prepared the Hudsons for service, the line's first diesels were going to work: NW2's 51-54 from La Grange. These goats were not TH&B's first internal-combustion power, for since 1927, gas-electric 301, a 60-foot EMC car built under license by Canadian Car & Foundry, had operated on a rigorous international circuit. Starting from Buffalo Central Terminal in early morning, the little car ran to Hamilton and on to Waterford, where it connected with an MC local to Detroit and Chicago, then returned to Hamilton and Buffalo. The routine lasted until 1954.

In August 1950, TH&B began dieselization in earnest as GP7's 71-72 emerged as the first units built at the new General Motors plant in London, Ont. By year end, two more London GP7's and SW9's 55-58 had TH&B steam on the ropes. Delivery of GP7's 75-77 in summer 1953 dieselized TH&B freights, and steam-boiler-equipped GP9's 401-403 finished off TH&B steam in spring '54. (Interestingly, the 70's operated short-hood-forward, but the 400's long-hood-forward, as on NYC.) On March 22, 1954, Hudson 501 became the last TH&B locomotive under steam, working east to Toronto on train 722 and returning on 821. Sister NYC 5374 worked 792 and 821 the same day to end all steam on the run.

The glory days of TH&B passenger trains also were numbered. By the '60's, the only train left through Hamilton's Hunter Street station was the overnight Toronto-Buffalo-New York City *Ontarian*. TH&B's three passenger Geeps were bumped to freight, and NYC E's and CP diesels handled the *Ontarian*. In October 1970, the train was replaced by CP RDC's on a daylight turn to Buffalo. TH&B went freight-only in April 1981, when VIA Rail Canada cancelled the run in favor of its Niagara Falls trains on CN.

Otherwise, TH&B was remarkably stable from the end of steam through the '70's, settling in a comfortable routine as Geeps worked wayfreights from Hamilton to Brantford and Waterford, and to Welland and Port Maitland. The




Cars and vans (caboose) on TH&B wore a distinctive yellow scheme. On July 17, 1973, van 63 brings up the rear of the Port Maitland local as it crosses a wooden trestle south of Smithville.

switchers patrolled the Belt Line and industrial tracks of Hamilton, built trains at Aberdeen Yard and Kinnear, and worked the old H&D to Dundas and on CN rights between Welland and Port Colborne. TH&B Geeps pooled with NYC (and later, Penn Central) sisters on the nightly road freight from Buffalo to the CP yard in Toronto.

Except for the loss of GP7 71, wrecked and burned in a fatal crossing collision in February 1980, the TH&B roster remained unchanged. The original units that killed off TH&B steam stayed in service through the mid-'80's, working home rails and carrying the same colors and numbers they'd worn since birth.

Conrail, ordered to divest of PC's interest in TH&B, sold its stake to CP on April 19, 1977, but the little line continued to enjoy autonomy for another decade. In January 1987, CP finally lowered the flag, integrating TH&B into its London Division. That same year, the switchers were sold and the faithful Geeps sent to CP's Angus shops, where they were chop-nosed and rebuilt as CP 1600's.

Today, TH&B's seven-story Hunter Street station/headquarters in Hamilton, restored in its 1933 art deco splendor, serves GO Transit passengers and city bus riders. The Belt Line still taps Hamilton's industrial heart, and rails still extend to Lake Erie at Port Maitland. Moreover, hot international freights still pound over the little piece of CPR still known to many as the TH&B, exceeding its founders' dreams of a bridge line linking the three namesake cities. 

TH&B fact file

(Comparative figures are for 1929 and 1979)

Route-miles: 111; 110

Locomotives: 31; 18

Passenger cars: 17; 0

Freight cars: 1,357; 1,167

Headquarters city: Hamilton, Ont.

Special interest group: Toronto, Hamilton & Buffalo Railway Historical Society, 208 Chalmers St., Oakville, ON Canada L6L 5R9; www.thbrailway.ca

Recommended reading: *In the Shadow of Giants*, by Norman S. Helm (Boston Mills Press, 1978; Preston House Publishers, '96).

Source: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999)