

Tracks of the Black Bear

Algoma Central, with mining origins, served a remote region of Ontario • **By Steve Glischinski**



Algoma Central train No. 1 for Hearst, behind two Geeps, crosses the line's scenic highlight, the Montreal River trestle, on June 5, 1972.

Walter A. Peters; J. David Ingles collection

Certain railroads seem to have an aura of mystery about them, running through remote areas seldom visited by outsiders. Ontario's Algoma Central Railway (ACR), which ran from Sault Ste. Marie 296 miles north to Hearst, was one. Named for the region it served, Algoma Central passed through some of the most remote country in North America, including the famed Agawa Canyon.

The canyon is what brought ACR to most people's attention, and even today under Canadian National ownership, provincially subsidized trains carry trainloads of tourists from "the Soo" 114 miles north to the Agawa Canyon Wilderness Park, where during a layover they may disembark to take in the glories of the park the ACR helped develop. The only other access is by hiking trail.

Iron ore played an early role in the railroad's development. In the 1890s a gold boom near Wawa Lake, 140 miles north of the Soo, brought in prospectors, and in 1898 one discovered high-grade hematite ore in the area. Meanwhile, businessman Francis H. Clergue had arrived in Sault Ste. Marie in 1894 and began development of power plants to harness the flow of the St. Mary's River,

which links Lake Superior with Lake Huron. He went on to develop a pulp mill, streetcar systems in both Sault Ste. Marie (Ontario's and Michigan's), a ferry service, and a foundry and machine shop that could handle lakeboat and locomotive overhauls. These were controlled by Consolidated Lake Superior Co., a holding firm. When word of the ore deposit became known, Clergue moved to develop the Helen Mine at the new settlement of Wawa.

To move the ore, and to bring logs to the pulp mill, the Algoma Central Railway was incorporated August 11, 1899. Federal and provincial charters allowed the railroad to build from the Soo to the Canadian Pacific main line at Franz, 194 miles north, and to Michipicoten Harbor on Lake Superior. Since the harbor was just 12 miles from Wawa, the railroad built this isolated line first so the iron ore could be transferred to lakeboats. The ore went to Algoma Steel, another Clergue brainchild, which opened a steelworks on the west side of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.; its main business was producing rails for several Canadian lines. Later, ACR would handle all-rail shipments of ore from Wawa to the Soo.

In 1901, Clergue acquired the charter

of the Ontario, Hudson Bay & Western, which intended to build a line north from the CPR main to Hudson Bay. The company then changed its name to Algoma Central & Hudson Bay Railway, anticipating a connection to a Hudson Bay port. That never materialized, and in 1965 the name reverted to Algoma Central Railway.

Construction from the Soo progressed slowly. By 1903, 56 miles had been built, and the line was used to take timber to the pulp mill. That year, however, Algoma Central fell victim to the bankruptcy of Clergue's Consolidated Lake Superior Co., and construction halted for six years. Work resumed in 1909, and by the end of 1911 the railroad had crossed the Montreal River at milepost 92 on a 1,550-foot-long, 130-foot-high curved trestle that remains the line's scenic highlight today.

A connection with the Michipicoten branch was realized in 1912 at Hawk Junction, and AC&HB reached both the CPR main at Franz and CNR predecessor Canadian Northern's line at Oba in the same year. AC&HB finally attained what would be its northern terminus, Hearst — where it connected with the National Transcontinental Railway — in



“Baggage” on ACR was varied, and important, as is evident at Hearst in 1951 (left). Spruce Haven Lodge (above) is a typical remote “station.”

Left photo, A. C. Kalmbach; above, Russ Porter, J. David Ingles collection

1914. (Canadian Government Railways took over the NTR in 1915, and the newly named, government-owned Canadian National Railways took over Canadian Northern in 1918.)

Under the Ontario Land Grant Aid Act of 1900, and as a result of its commitment to build a railway, Algoma Central received more than 1.6 million acres of forestlands in the Algoma region north of Sault Ste. Marie. Grant conditions included an obligation to “maintain a Great Lakes fleet of four steel vessels of at least 2,000 tons carrying capacity.”

In 1900, the directors of Consolidated Lake Superior Co. approved purchase of “four steam vessels to be used for freight and passenger service in connection with the company’s railway.” Operated as a division of ACR, the lakeboats became a familiar sight on the Great Lakes and remain so today, with their funnels wearing the “Black Bear” emblem the railroad introduced in the early 1900s. The logo first appeared on stationery and was applied to rolling stock beginning during World War II. On the sides of locomotives, the bear always faced forward.

From 2-8-0s to GP40s

For a railroad its size, ACR owned a variety of steam power. The first engines were secondhand, including 11 acquired in 1899: four Lehigh Valley 4-6-0s and seven ex-Chicago, Burlington & Quincy 0-4-0s. ACR’s first new power, four Baldwin 2-8-0s, arrived in 1900, and two years later came two 0-6-0s from Canadian Locomotive Co. The Consolidation type would become ACR’s dominant road power until World War II. By 1926 all steam from ACR’s early years was

gone, leaving five 4-6-0s and 15 2-8-0s purchased in 1911-12.

ACR also owned a pair of 2-10-2s, Nos. 50–51, built in 1929 by CLC to handle coal trains from the Michipicoten docks to the CN interchanges at Oba and Hearst. ACR soon discovered, though, that the track and bridges on its north end couldn’t handle the big engines, and similar problems were found on the curves and grades of the Michipicoten branch. Until the end of steam in 1952, the 2-10-2s were assigned to the road’s south end. ACR also owned the only two 4-8-0s to run in Canada, Nos. 25–26, which came from the Iron Range & Huron Bay in 1902. They were sold in 1917.

During 1940–43, World War II traffic required bigger engines, so ACR bought secondhand 2-8-2s: two from Virginian Railway, seven from the Wabash, and eight from Minneapolis & St. Louis.

Algoma Central was the first major railroad in Canada to dieselize, in 1952. In 1950 it tested EMD FP7 demonstrator 7001, and was convinced, but instead of F units, ACR went for GP7s. The road ordered 21 (Nos. 150–170), plus SW8 switchers 140 and 141, from the General Motors Diesel plant in London, Ont., for 1952 delivery. All came painted in the attractive maroon, yellow, and gray scheme identical to that of Lackawanna’s road diesels. A decade later, in 1963, came GP9s 171 and 172 from GMD, a model last built in the U.S. in 1959; they were the last GP9s built. Demonstrator 7001, incidentally, was sold to the Soo Line and runs today in Soo maroon at the railroad museum in Duluth, Minn.

The 1970s finally brought “second-generation” power to ACR: three SD40s



in 1971 and six SD40-2s in 1973. A decade later, ACR bought six GP38-2s, its last new power. With the newer units came the retirement of many of the venerable Geeps, but in 1978 ACR had nine of the GP7s rebuilt: five at GMD and four at CN’s Transcona Shops in Winnipeg. ACR’s last diesels arrived in 1994: GP40-2s 190–191, rebuilt by National



Typical of ACR's secondhand fleet of the 1960s–1980s was this former SP articulated coach, at Agawa Canyon in '84. A black bear and tracks (below "Algoma") was painted on many cars.

J. David Ingles

Railway Equipment from Milwaukee Road GP40s.

ACR's Steelton yard and shop complex adjacent to Algoma Steel in the Soo maintained the locomotives and cars. In deference to the region's winter weather, one building housed an indoor turntable.

Tour trains, and changes

In 1950s AC&HB began advertising fall color tours from the Soo to Agawa Canyon on its regular passenger trains. Their popularity grew, and in the 1960s a separate tour train was established during summer and early autumn. They became immensely popular, and the road began buying used passenger cars to handle the business. During the 1970s and '80s, ACR ran some of the longest passenger trains in North America, up to 24 cars pulled by as many as five Geeps. Traffic grew to about 100,000 passengers a season on the Canyon trains. ACR ads exhorted passengers to "Ride the Tracks of the Black Bear," and the road also began a variation, a winter "Snow Train" running on weekends be-

tween Sault Ste. Marie and the Canyon.

The ACR was built through the heart of the 18,800-square-mile Algoma District recreational wilderness area. In most cases, the railroad has been the only means of reaching the area, other than small floatplanes. Its Soo–Hearst passenger train stopped almost anywhere along the line, providing year-round access for residents or visiting campers, hunters, and fishermen to private camps, cottages, and lodges. Baggage cars — often more than one per train — would carry many a canoe and snowmobile, in addition to supplies of food, fuel, and such. Providing this service long has been a losing proposition, though, and in the modern era, the local trains — now less than daily — have been subsidized as "essential service."

ACR in the 1960s began to diversify, expanding its marine operations and entering into trucking, real estate, forestry, and mining. By 1979 these enterprises were more profitable than rail operations, and in 1990, in a corporate reorganization, the company's name was

changed to Algoma Central Corp., with Algoma Central Railway as a subsidiary.

By 1994, the railway was handling a little over 30,000 shipments a year with 450 employees. Total operating revenues were \$21 million, including passenger and tour train revenue of \$5.3 million, of which \$2.3 million came from the province. Still, the company lost about \$800,000, and the corporation decided to sell the railroad.

Enter Wisconsin Central

Algoma Central Corp. found a buyer in Ed Burkhardt's expanding regional railroad Wisconsin Central Ltd., formed in 1987 from former Soo Line routes, including the line to Sault Ste. Marie. WCL formed subsidiary WC Canada Holdings to purchase the ACR, which occurred on January 31, 1995; the line became Algoma Central Railway, Inc. Much of the \$8.4 million funding for purchase came from the Province of Ontario through grants and loans, and included in the sale was the right to use the Black Bear emblem. WCL immediately cut the number of employees from 450 to 220. In 1998, when Algoma Steel closed its iron-ore mine in Wawa, WCL abandoned the Michipicoten branch.

Although WC integrated Algoma Central's diesels into its fleet and sent them to the U.S., they weren't the last to wear the Algoma Central name. To release ACR's newer units for U.S. service, WC bought 11 F units from VIA Rail for Algoma Central passenger trains. Included were six FP9s, a rebuilt FP7, and four F9Bs. The cab units entered service in July 1995, painted in silver and maroon with a yellow stripe and Black Bear nose logos; two of the B units were reactivated later. Up to six Fs were used on



Second-generation GP38-2s and SD40s pose at ACR's shop in 1984; WCL-era passenger and freight units soak up sun at Hearst 13 years later.

Left, J. David Ingles collection; above, Robert S. McGonigal

the Canyon train during peak season, and two dome cars were added. The “covered wagon” era ended in early 2001 after WC determined it would be cheaper to run the trains with freight units.

Later in 2001, Canadian National bought Wisconsin Central, with the ACR included, and today the former ACR is the Soo Subdivision of CN’s Eastern Division. Modern CN freight power has replaced the old ACR and WC units.

Since its takeover, the Canadian giant has tried to downsize and/or eliminate the passenger trains. In 2004, winter passenger service to Hearst was reduced to three round trips per week, eliminating the northbound train on Saturday and the southbound on Sunday. In 2007, summer service was likewise reduced, and in 2014 remained triweekly in each direction. CN discontinued the Snow Train in 2013.

A key element in drawing tourists to an otherwise economically depressed area, the Agawa Canyon Tour Trains remain, with local and provincial financial support. The trains are made up of mostly former CN Tempo intercity cars built in 1968 and last employed on the defunct Denver Ski Train. Faced with continuing the operation, CN in 2009 bought the Ski Train’s cars, plus its three former Amtrak F40PHs. It’s a far cry from the days of long tour trains with conventional “heritage” equipment, but at least the Tracks of the Black Bear remain in service for both freight and passengers through the Ontario wilderness. ■

Algoma Central fact file



(comparative figures are for 1938 and 1995)

Route-miles: 323, 322

Locomotives: 22, 23

Freight and passenger cars: 993, 879

Headquarters city: Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

Special interest group: Canadian National Railways Historical Association, Greg King, Membership, 51 Sommerfeld Drive, Regina, SK S4V 0C6; www.cnlines.ca.

Recommended reading: *Tracks of the Black Bear*, by Dale Wilson (Green Tree Publishing, 1974); *Algoma Central Railway*, by O. S. Nock (A&C Black Ltd., 1975); and three books by Dale Wilson, published by Nickel Belt Rails in 1984, 1990, and 2013.

Source: Author’s materials