

Long effort to open B.C.'s interior

Launched in 1912, the province's Pacific Great Eastern wouldn't become "whole" for 44 years

BY DON EVANS



M630 710, still lettered PGE, leads a northbound near Lillooet in July 1977. A cableless M420B and a leased CN C424 are among the trailing units.

James C. Herold, J. David Ingles collection

It was neither "great" nor "eastern," but the Pacific Great Eastern Railway, incorporated February 27, 1912, was conceived to open up the interior of Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia, to generate economic growth and prosperity. It would connect Vancouver, the major coastal port of "B.C.," with the Grand Trunk Pacific's main line at Prince George, 427 miles north. (Vancouver already was linked to the Dominion's eastern provinces by rail when Canadian Pacific drove its "last spike" at Craigallechie, B.C., on November 7, 1885.)

PGE was so named perhaps to attract British investment, and it did get some from England's Great Eastern Railway, but it wouldn't have contiguous rails to Prince George until 1952, and those were from Squamish, not Vancouver. Geography was a big problem. PGE struggled into existence with two disconnected sections. One reached 12.7 miles from North Vancouver to Horseshoe Bay, but this first incarnation would not last. The main line, which began at the dock in Squamish (named Newport at the time), was built with starts and stops during 1912–21 for 347 miles to Quesnel (Kwih-NELL).

The project struggled with financial

challenges, and when early private financing failed, the railway became an asset of the Province in 1918, making it subject to changes in political will that created those starts and stops.

Construction north from Squamish encountered obstacles, with the first train reaching Lillooet (Lil-oo-ETT), 118 miles north, on February 20, 1915. Plans to

close the Horseshoe Bay–Squamish gap were shelved due to construction costs along the steep cliffs of Howe Sound. Passengers traveled from Vancouver to Squamish by Union Steamship; freight moved by tug and barge before resuming the journey north on the isolated rails.

The short North Shore Subdivision, meantime, opened in January 1914 con-



It's 1949 at Quesnel, then the end of the line, as PGE's last new engine, 2-8-2 163, heads south with a freight ahead of the passenger train, whose 70-tonners have run around upon arrival.

David A. Strassman



Herewith the “before and after” of PGE passenger service: Two 70-tonners haul a mixed train north from Squamish ca. 1950 (left), and tri-weekly Prince George-North Vancouver train 2, with two Budd cars (RDC3 BC-31 and an RDC1), loads at Williams Lake (right) in August 1972.

Left, Linn H. Westcott; right, Robert P. Schmidt, J. David Ingles collection

necting North Vancouver first with Dun-darave, then in 1915 with Whytecliff (Horseshoe Bay). Mostly this was a local passenger line, with early Hall Scott gas cars 101, 102, and 103 the regular conveyances to the Whytecliff picnic area. Service was discontinued by 1928 but the right of way was not abandoned.

PGE’s first bought-new steam locomotive, 2-8-0 No. 51, arrived from Montreal Locomotive Works in 1913, supplementing secondhand power. It and sister 52 served until retirement in 1954, by then in a fleet of more than a dozen 2-8-0s and 2-8-2s. PGE’s last steam engine was 2-8-2 163, built in 1947 and scrapped in 1956.

Passenger accommodations, often in mixed trains, were in an eclectic assemblage of used cars from across North America, including former Indiana Railroad interurban sleeping cars and coaches and diners cast off by several roads.

A lone GE 65-tonner, 551, was PGE’s first diesel, built in June 1948 to be the Squamish dock switcher. It was joined during 1949–50 by six GE 70-tonners that plied the main line in pairs, providing tractive power equivalent to a 2-8-2. Next, during 1951–53 as the railway grew, were eight beefier Alco-style RSC3s (A1A trucks for PGE’s light rail), 561–568, from Montreal (soon reshad to B-B), then 10 RS3s, 569–578, and in 1956, RS10s 579–586, all able to serve as the track was being upgraded for more and heavier trains. All wore the orange paint scheme with a green stripe as found on the 70-tonners. By 1956 all steam had been retired.

The dream achieved

PGE kept expanding, pushing north from Quesnel in 1949. After constructing a big bridge over the Cottonwood River, a major obstacle, PGE in 1952 reached

Prince George to connect with Canadian National’s former GTP main line from Alberta to the seaport of Prince Rupert.

The other gap, connecting Squamish with North Vancouver, was filled during 1953–56 as a major construction project — blasting the right of way out of the vertical rock walls along Howe Sound, a Coastal fjord — was completed. The challenges here were not just physical, however. The old right of way, unused since 1928 but not officially abandoned, still was in place through West Vancouver, but many residents had occupied parts of it, assuming a train would never again be seen in their backyards! Despite the uproar, the trains did indeed return.

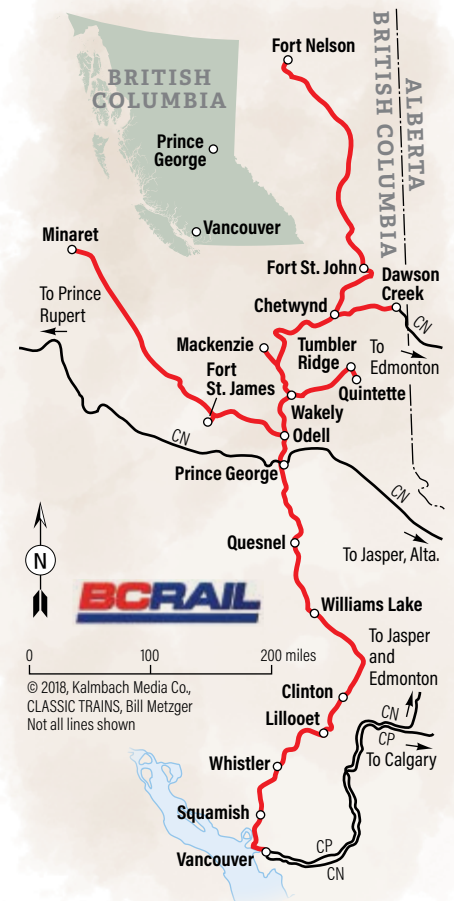
British Columbia’s Premier W.A.C. Bennett had become the champion of the PGE, and indeed B.C. now had a continuous railway through its central interior, providing a rail transportation route for the forest products and mineral deposits plentiful in the region.

PGE ran a two-section special train to formally open the line in August 1956. Orange PGE diesels led consists including PGE, CPR, CNR, Great Northern, and Milwaukee Road passenger cars as the celebration moved north from North Vancouver. But for all the pomp and reconstruction, PGE still remained a work in progress — the three diesels on the first train each had to be separated with two freight cars to deal with bridge weight restrictions, and a landslide occurred, delaying the train several hours on the newly built section along Howe Sound. But the dream had been achieved.

With the railway now complete, another era began. It was time to modernize the passenger service, and PGE selected Budd Rail Diesel Cars to replace its eclectic collection of ancient passenger cars.

Arriving in 1956 were three each all-coach RDC1s, BC-10 to BC-12, and coach-mail-express “combine” RDC3s, BC-30 to BC-32. By 1957 they provided the mainstay passenger service, and by 1959 other PGE passenger trains were history. RDCs were ideal for the route, as they could accelerate and brake quickly, and run at a higher track speed than locomotive-hauled conventional consists. This allowed a North Vancouver–Prince George run to be a day trip.

In subsequent years PGE would add



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Not all lines shown



Two of PGE's 18 bought-new Montreal-built RS3s switch at Prince George on July 8, 1977. Front unit 567 wears the last PGE emblem, while trailer 566 has the British Columbia Railway logo.

Two photos this page, James C. Herold, J. David Ingles collection



British Columbia's ex-CPR Royal Hudson 2860 snakes along Howe Sound at Horseshoe Bay with a Squamish-bound excursion in July '77.

several secondhand Budd cars, with a peak fleet of 12 and trains as long as 9 RDCs. The RDC3s were equipped with small kitchens to offer meal service, and the train name *Caribou Dayliner* came into use. While many schedule experiments would occur, the standard operation settled into daily service from North Vancouver to Lillooet and return, with

some cars being separated at Lillooet three days a week to continue on to Prince George, returning south the next day.

Reaching the resources

Premier Bennett was not finished in expanding PGE farther north to tap B.C.'s timber and ore reserves. The railway built north from Prince George into the Peace River area, reaching Fort St. John, 262 miles away via Chetwynd, by 1958. Secondary lines were built west 24 miles from Kennedy to Mackenzie; from Chetwynd east 61 miles to Dawson Creek and a connection with Northern Alberta Railways (later CN); and in 1968 from near Prince George northwest 73 miles to Fort St. James. Bennett envisioned this "Dease Lake extension" to someday reach Yukon Territory and Alaska, but with less demand for asbestos and copper, the area's primary resources, construction beyond Dease Lake, 412 miles from Fort St. James, became impractical. Construction ended in the late 1970s; track exists to Mileage 309.5, but operation ends at Minaret, mileage 274.

A push farther north 252 miles from Fort St. John had reached Fort Nelson, at Milepost 300 from Dawson Creek on the Alaska Highway, in 1971, creating a 975.7-mile trunk from North Vancouver. The final expansion, the 82-mile Tumbler Ridge branch east to two coal mines, opened in 1983. This line was notable for being electrified, because of two long tunnels, with seven new 6,000 h.p. General Motors/ASEA GF6C units as motive power. When the Quintette mine closed in 2000, the outer 12 miles, through the

tunnels, became dormant, so the electrification was turned off and diesels ran through, 70 miles to the Bullmoose Mine. When it closed in 2003, the line was mothballed, but part of it has recently reopened, again with diesels going through.

All this expansion resulted in a 1,261-mile railway, the third-largest in Canada, opening the province's natural resources and generating the considerable economic benefit expected by those who first dreamed of the project.

Meanwhile, a new name

Reflecting reality, the system had been renamed British Columbia Railway (BCOL) in 1972, although the recent PGE two-tone green color scheme (later solid green) on equipment was retained. During the '70s, BCOL modernized its rolling stock and upgraded its infrastructure. More diesels came, and the fleet was virtually all Montreal-built until 1980, when new GM SD40-2s were acquired. (An FM switcher was briefly on hand in 1971-72.) BCOL became a mecca for Alco fans, with models S13, RS3, RS10, RS18, C630M, M630, M420, and M420B (cableless) active, plus some Alcos: two ex-Lake Superior & Ishpeming RS3s; two ex-Lehigh & Hudson River C420s; and nine ex-Erie Lackawanna C425s. The reliance on big six-motor units to pull longer and heavier freights became possible as the main line was steadily upgraded with strengthened bridges, improved right of way, and welded rail. The northern reaches remained the realm of four-motor units, however.

From its early days, PGE always had been a fan favorite, with its spectacular scenery and rugged determination to get somewhere, then later, long-distance RDC trains. Attractions beyond Alco/MLW diesels would come, as in 1974 the railway began a steam excursion program on the south end with the provincially owned former Canadian Pacific Royal Hudson 2860, which would last 25 years. Also in the future was 17 years of the electrified mine branch.

The year 1984 saw another basic change and a restructuring, with the renaming to BC Rail and provincial red-white-and-blue colors replacing green. With the old MLW plant closing in 1985, GE diesels joined BC Rail's fleet, 24 Dash 8-40CM cowl units being first. Passenger service expanded, with the *Pacific Starlight Dinner Train* and *Whistler North-*



Two of the new GM/ASEA 6,000 h.p. GF6C motors rest on the Tumbler Ridge branch on July 22, 1984. The electrification lasted until 2000.

John C. Benson

wind tour train. The heady times would not last, though, as the new services and the Royal Hudson train ceased in 2000–01. Finally, on October 31, 2002, the regular RDC passenger trains ended 45 years of service.

All this was in preparation for divestiture by the Province, culminating with the sale of freight-only BC Rail to Canadian National July 15, 2004. CN continues to run virtually the entire railway. ■

DON EVANS, a lifelong railfan living in North Vancouver, is a director of the Heritage Rail Alliance and President Emeritus of the West Coast Railway Association, which in its Squamish museum has a collection of equipment including Royal Hudson 2860 and many items of PGE heritage. This is his second CLASSIC TRAINS byline.

PGE/BCOL FACT FILE



(comparative figures are for 1929, 1984 [change to BC Rail], and 2004 [sale to CN])

Route-miles: 348; 1,261; 1,421

Locomotives: 12; 126; 106

Passenger cars: 28; 6; 0

Freight cars: 309; 703; 8,359

Headquarters city: Vancouver, B.C.

Special interest group: West Coast Railway Association, wcra.org

Notable passenger train: *Caribou Dayliner*

Recommended reading: *PGE-BCR 100 Years*, by Donald C. Lewis (LPD Publishing); *British Columbia Railway*, by J. F. Garden (Polla Books)

Sources: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2014); *Canadian Trackside Guide*; author's references