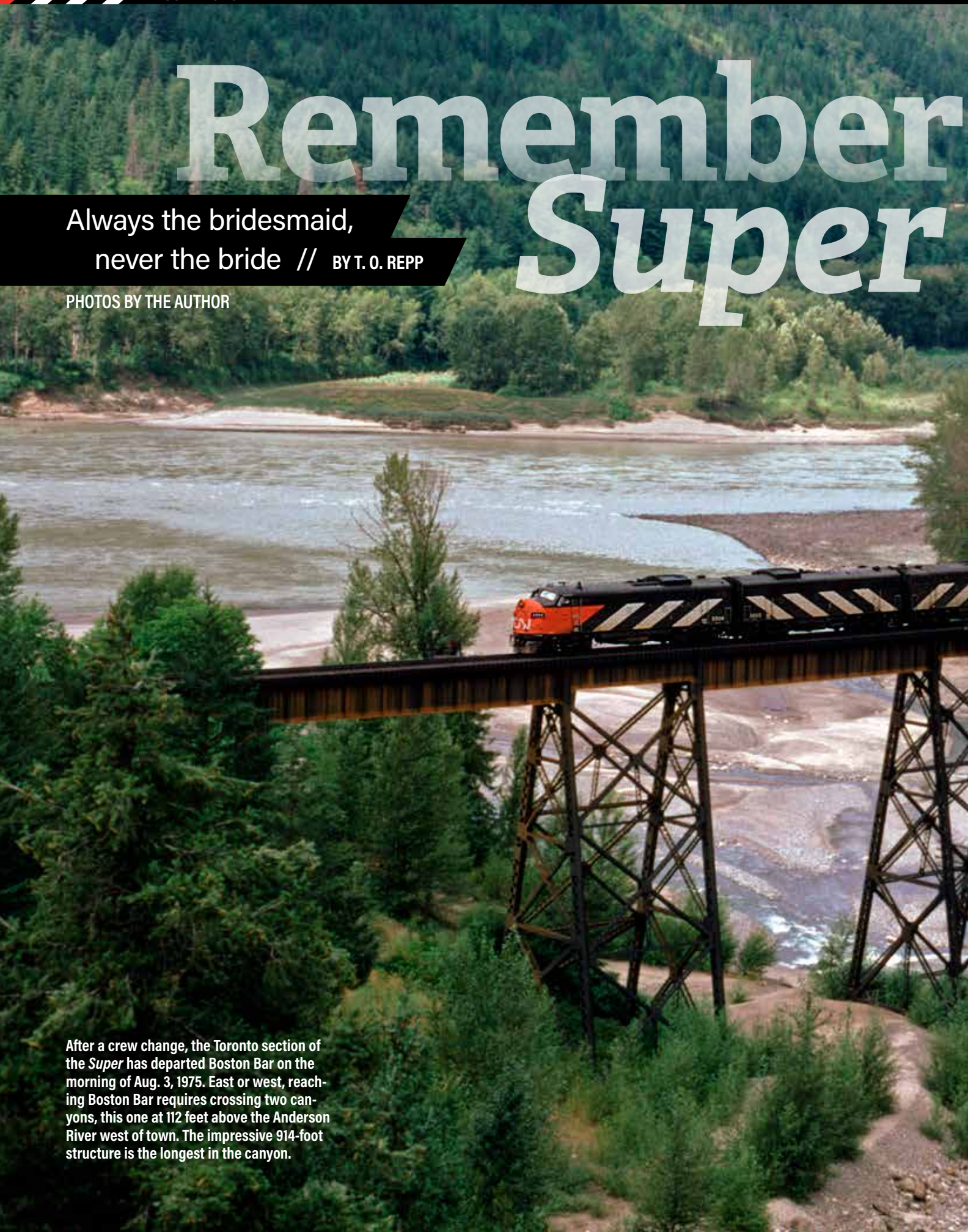
# Remember *Super*

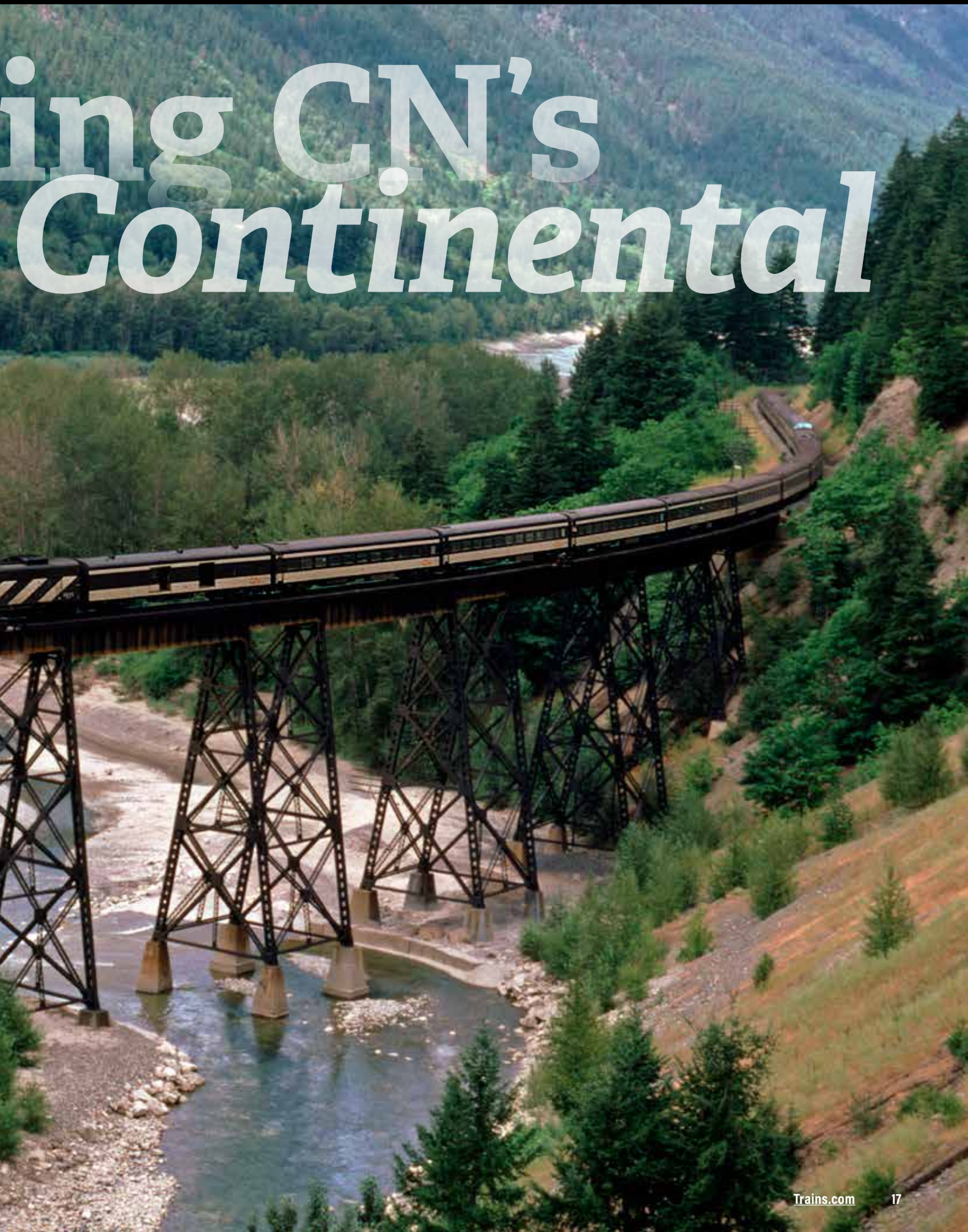
## Always the bridesmaid, never the bride // BY T. O. REPP

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



After a crew change, the Toronto section of the *Super* has departed Boston Bar on the morning of Aug. 3, 1975. East or west, reaching Boston Bar requires crossing two canyons, this one at 112 feet above the Anderson River west of town. The impressive 914-foot structure is the longest in the canyon.

# ing CN's Continental



**Coffee thermos at the ready, cigarette in hand, lunchbox on the deadman's pedal, CN engineer Vreeland keeps a steady eye on the tracks ahead.**

I am standing in the cab of Canadian National FP9 No. 6505 leading the eastbound *Super Continental* on, of all days, a very patriotic July 4, 1976. We're following the graceful curves of the North Thompson River north and east of Kamloops, B.C. It's a ride I'd been planning for nearly a year, taking advantage of CN's relatively low-key approach to such pursuits, not to mention the largesse of crews based out of nearby Kamloops.

Today's version of the *Super* is a classic: 21 passenger cars led by a quartet of FP9s in CN's inimitable black, red, and white paint scheme. The roar of all those F units seems to underscore the crew's eagerness to get to the maximum 65 mph as quickly as possible. In less than two years, the train behind us will be conveyed to the new corporation VIA Rail Canada. But on this particular Sunday, the *Super* is pure CN.

We had just got underway from the flag stop at Clearwater, a small town on the North Thompson River, when we stopped again — for a cat, carrying her kittens across the tracks. And if you know cats, she was taking her damned sweet time about it, unperturbed by the impatient rumble of 7,000 hp worth of passenger diesels suddenly brought to a halt.

This, in a nutshell, was Canadian railroading. Big six-axle MLWs. Wooden boxcars carrying grain. The grandest scenery on earth. A train worthy of the Dominion's vast geography. And a crew so respectful in that Canadian way, even of a cat and her kittens. Perhaps Trains Editor David P. Morgan said it best: "We train watchers have a great emotional investment in Canadian trains."


**The author's ticket for the trip from Blue River to Red Pass, 88 miles. Reserved seat coach $7 Blue Fare, signed by Vice President Marketing Garth Campbell.**

T. O. Repp collection

## A GRAND TRAIN

I saw my first *Super Continental* in Vancouver on a family vacation in 1967. On our way home, my brother and I decided to ride Great Northern's *Internation-*

**The *Super Continental* cruises along the North Thompson just north of Birch Island on July 4, 1976. Just look: four F9s with 21 cars!**

*al* from CN's Vancouver station to Seattle, where our parents would meet us. After purchasing our tickets, we walked outside where CN train 3, the Toronto section of the *Super Continental*, had just arrived. As we continued down the platform, we spotted an eastbound consist being towed through the wash racks with a leased ex-Chessie dome-sleeper on the rear.

After reading Pierre Berton's "The Impossible Railway" about how Canadian Pacific carved its way into British Columbia, I took my very first paid vacation there in 1973. I followed the *Super Continental* from Vancouver up the Fraser and Thompson canyons before heading east of Kamloops along the CP to Banff. Compared to modest-size *Canadians*, CN's *Super Continentals* were 20-plus car monsters running in two sections, affording photographs in daylight most anywhere along its route. We Americans were still adjusting to Amtrak; experiencing these Canadian trains was like turning the clock back 20 years.

After I moved to the Seattle area, the Fraser-Thompson canyons were seduc-

**Just south of Blue River, our train negotiates Port D'Enfer, or Little Hells Gate Canyon, where trains used to stop to allow passengers to view the scenery. Due to a derailment near Messiter, so too did we for a time, allowing me to climb down for a few snapshots.**


# CN Super Continental

tively close at hand, especially on holiday weekends. In addition to railfan road trips, I rode every passenger train in B.C., though none as often as the four times I rode the *Super Continental*, plus two memorable cab rides. How grand is that?

While CP's *Canadian* drew raves, it was the more utilitarian *Super Continental* that carried the most passengers. The New Image design scheme made CN's interiors far more inviting than CP's, which seemed stuck in the 1950s, patched upholstery and all. In the ensuing years, I watched the *Super Continental* get absorbed into the VIA system, then disappear altogether, only to reappear with a different name.

## A BICENTENNIAL CAB RIDE

In August 1975, friend Steve Fuller and I were taking night shots of the *Super Continental* in Kamloops when its engineer, Dennis Dohm, invited us up into the cab. After pleasantries, he offered us to come along with him as far as Savona, 26 miles west at the far end of Kamloops Lake. Tempting as it was, we declined (thus avoiding who would ride the cab, and who would drive out to retrieve the other). But we did get an invitation to ride "any time."

I wrote Dennis the next summer and he made good on his promise to arrange a cab ride with one of his fellow Kamloops-based engineers. The invite was strictly informal; after all, this was the kinder, gentler 1970s in rural Canada. No need to get management involved.

With plans in place, I got up early the morning of July 4, 1976, to catch the eastbound *Super Continental* at Kamloops Junction. Engineer Vreeland and his fireman were most accommodating. I would ride the cab north over the 139-mile Clearwater Sub to Blue River, then continue aboard the train in coach to Red Pass Junction, where I would catch westbound No. 1 back to Kamloops a few hours later. Red Pass was not listed as a conditional stop in either direction; it was just the way CN ran trains back then.

We got underway on time, proceeding along the rolling farmlands of the North Thompson River. At Rayleigh, seven miles north, we took the siding for a westbound sulfur drag. We slowed down enough to avoid stopping before getting the red-over-green at the east switch. The four FP9s roared back to life, stretching our 21-car train up to the 65 mph maximum. Sitting high in a pug-nosed EMD F unit didn't feel that fast. We seemed to be just rolling along, unaware of how much tonnage was behind us.

After the aforementioned feline encounter at Clearwater, we rolled to a stop near Messiter, where crews were cleaning up a sulfur train derailment. Blue River was reached at 10:50 a.m., and I climbed down from our FP9, expressing thanks to the crew for my four-hour ride. My next task was to buy tickets for both east- and westbound trains, something I forgot to do in Kamloops. This took a lot longer than anticipated, but with tickets in hand, I boarded the train patiently waiting only for me.

At 12:35, our eastbound train made an unscheduled stop at Red Pass Junction, where I jumped off. I watched a few freights roll by before being picked up by the westbound *Super Continental* at 3 p.m. for my return to Kamloops. As a short-haul passenger, I got tickets in a regular coach rather than in the roomier, more comfortable Dayniter coach. The Sceneramic dome was open to all passengers (or was I trespassing?), and crews didn't seem to mind my taking advantage of the Dutch doors for a time. Next came dinner before we arrived back in Kamloops all too soon.

That was not my only cab ride on the *Continental*; three years later, I rode the train's locomotive again, this time from


**Both passenger and freight versions of CN's auto carriers were spotted at Drummondville, Quebec, in 1993. Built in 1957 by Canadian Car & Foundry, each 56-foot, double-deck, double-ended-door car could accommodate six automobiles.**


Kamloops west to Boston Bar in the Fraser River Canyon, returning on an empty sulfur drag. That was an adventure, too. I'll save that story for another time.

**This travel-worn reality on the *Super Continental* Sceneramic car in the 1970s contrasts with the glossy brochure artwork of the period.**

## ROOTS IN THE 1920S

The *Super*'s predecessor was the *Continental Limited*, launched by the newly formed Canadian National on Dec. 3, 1920. The train featured a fleet of new electrically lit, all-steel cars, soon joined by open air "Mountain Observation Cars" between Jasper and Kamloops during the summer.

In 1923, the railway created the CN Radio Department, which broadcast programs from 11 radio stations along the right-of-way to lounge and parlor cars fitted with headphones. Locals could also listen, making CN's Radio Department the first to operate in North America. Anti-competitive complaints led to the removal of the radios in 1931 and the network's sale as a Crown corporation to the federal government. It's known today as Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

Until the 1940s, there were no navigable roads from British Columbia over the Canadian Rockies to eastern Canada. So isolated were B.C. motorists that they drove on the left (British) side of the road until 1923. Both the CN and CP thus had a near-monopoly providing services for freight, passengers, express, and telegraph. Passenger traffic provided a robust source of revenue for many years, but new roads began to erode that advantage.

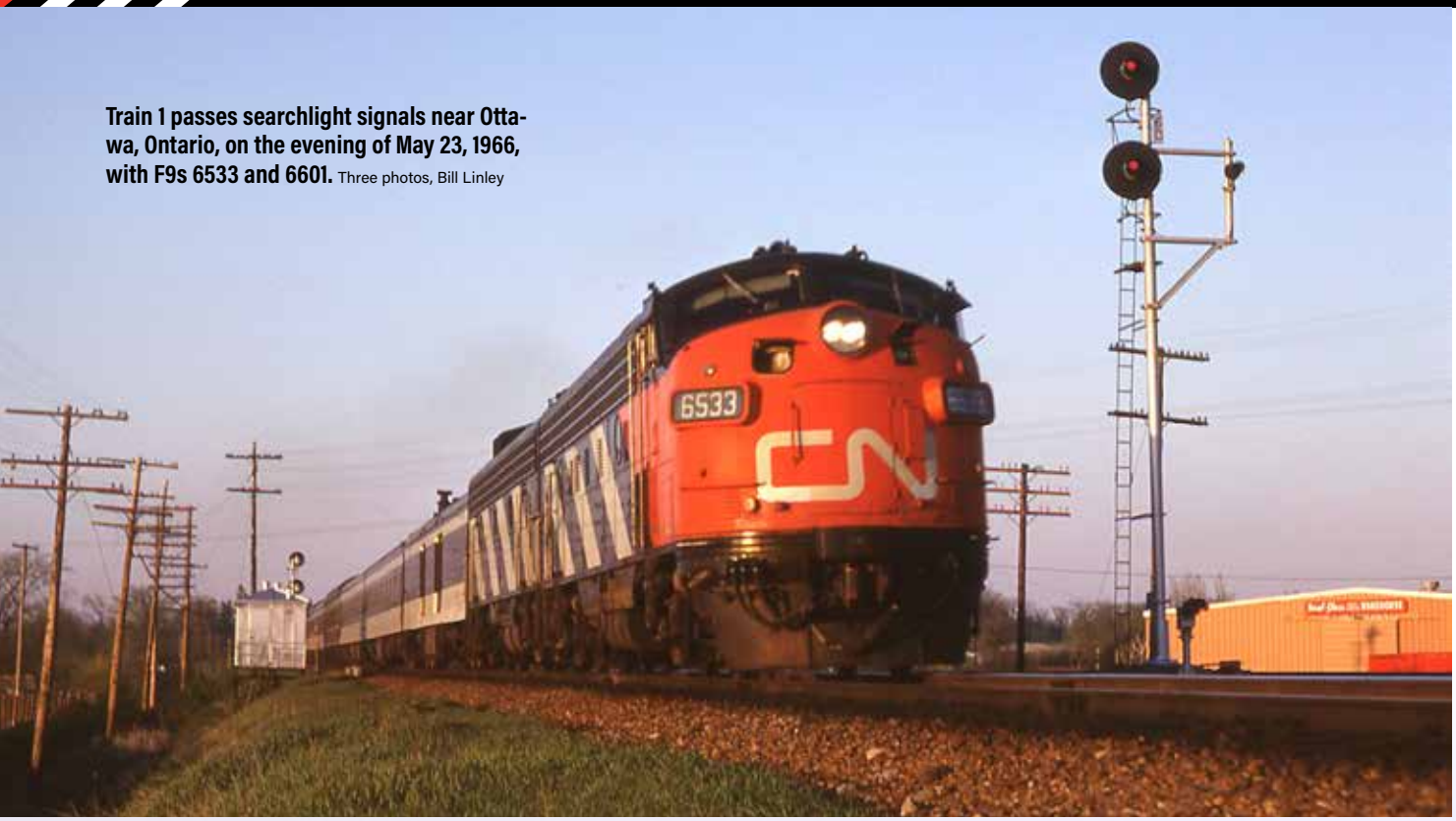
While American railroads introduced fast, diesel-powered, streamlined trains after World War II, CN and CP were still operating steam-powered trains with aging heavyweight cars. In an effort to compete with the new highways, both CN and CP began planning on new streamlined trains that were faster and more competitive.

After World War II, CN began modernizing heavyweight cars and acquiring 75 streamlined cars (all with six-wheel trucks), but economics and manufacturing backlogs prevented them from acquiring enough new rolling stock or diesels to re-equip its trains.

Facing competition from CP, CN placed orders for a staggering 389 streamlined cars in 1953 at a cost of $60 million, the largest order ever placed in North America in a year. National Steel Car Co. and Canadian Car & Foundry supplied baggage cars and coaches while Chicago-based Pullman-Standard built sleeping cars, diners, lounges, and parlors (the latter operated Montreal-Ottawa). The new fleet got a color scheme of green and black with yellow stripes similar to CN's late 1940s freight F3s. Seven consists were earmarked for a new train named the *Super Continental* (same spelling in French, though pronounced differently) scheduled to be inaugurated in 1955.


**CN instituted Car-Go-Rail service across the country in 1963. Cars were loaded at auto rental agencies in enclosed auto carriers, then forwarded to their destination in freight trains.**

T. O. Repp collection




**Train 1 passes searchlight signals near Ottawa, Ontario, on the evening of May 23, 1966, with F9s 6533 and 6601.** Three photos, Bill Linley

Unlike the CP, CN decided against dome cars for the very reason many eastern U.S. roads did: they wouldn't fit. According to Stanley Dingle, CN's executive vice president of operations at the time, "… whereas CP's Windsor Station could accommodate them, we could not at the time put dome cars through Central Station because of their height."

Historically, Canadian National long-haul passengers only accounted for 60% of the transcontinental business, and 40% intercity (e.g., Winnipeg-Edmonton). With so many cars being added and removed en route, observation cars were deemed impractical. The train had more lounge space than the *Canadian*, and, based on ridership, passengers didn't seem to mind.

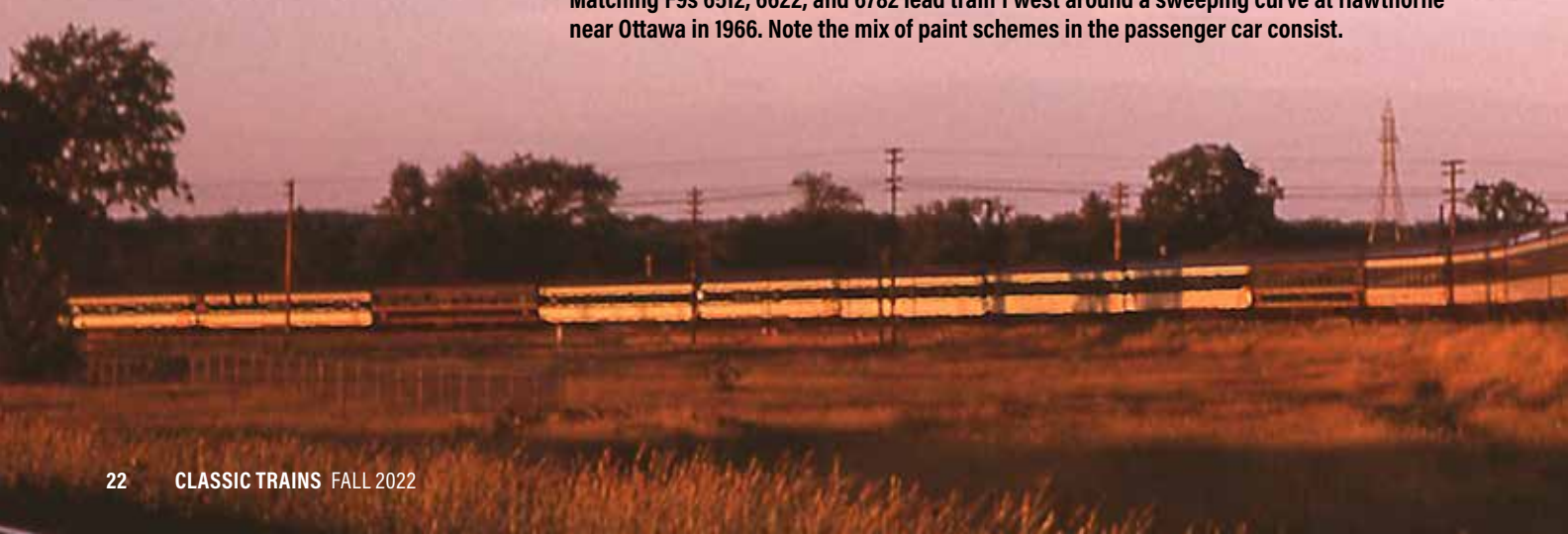
## MOTIVE POWER CHOICES

To power the new trains, CN ordered 26 A-B diesel locomotive pairs: 14 from General Motors Division (FP9A-F9Bs) and six each from Canadian Locomotive Works (CPA/B 16-5 C-Liners) and Montreal Locomotive Works (FPA/B-2s). None had dynamic brakes.

Initially, all three models operated randomly on a continuous 17-day transcontinental cycle, considered the longest in the world at the time. After some experience (break-ins and breakdowns), operational cycles were shortened, with GMDs settling in the west, the MLWs in the east. The temperamental CLCs were banished from mainline runs altogether.

The day before its inauguration, three *Super Continental* trainsets were placed on display at Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. On April 24, 1955, the new train began service on the same day CP inaugurated its *Canadian*. By limiting times at terminals (but no increase in speeds), the new schedule cut 14 hours off the westbound schedule and 10 hours eastbound, reducing overnight travel from four nights to three. Though its route was only 43 miles longer than the CP, *Super Continental*'s schedule was three hours slower eastbound and two

**Matching F9s 6512, 6622, and 6782 lead train 1 west around a sweeping curve at Hawthorne near Ottawa in 1966. Note the mix of paint schemes in the passenger car consist.**



hours slower westbound than its domed, stainless-steel rival.

As the 1950s came to a close, CN was losing close to $20 million a year on passenger services. A request to terminate the *Super Continental* in 1961 was denied, the government citing the notion of "essential services."

To stem losses, the CN decided on a bold plan to modernize its equipment and operations. Industrial designer Allan Fleming fashioned the "wet noodle" CN logo along with a new black and off-white livery for its trains. Three prototype coaches were painted in the new scheme with a blue window band. The latter didn't wear well and was changed to black.

**Train 2 with F9 6533 departs snow-covered Ottawa, Ontario, in February 1971 for Montreal.**

## INTERIOR UPDATES

On the inside, CN refreshed interiors with indirect lighting, bold colors, and improved seating at a cost of $10 million. A novel Red-White-Blue fare structure introduced in 1963 provided lower fares off-season and mid-week. (The "Red-White-Blue" slogan was inspired by a local drug store ad.)

Canadian National's New Image program seemed to be working. By the end of the 1960s, passenger-miles had doubled, but the surge put a squeeze on available equipment. Heavyweight cars continued to be modernized, and CN found a surplus of idled equipment stateside.

Sleepers were acquired almost everywhere, from the Boston & Maine, Florida East Coast, and Frisco. In 1964, CN acquired six Milwaukee Road Super Domes ("Sceneramic Cars") for its *Super Continental* and *Panorama*, along with six Skytop "Skyview" sleeper-observations for its Montreal-Halifax *Ocean*.

To handle the surge in tourists visiting the Expo '67 World's Fair in Montreal, three ex-*Chessie* dome-sleepers were leased from the Baltimore & Ohio.

The new image campaign and Expo '67 travel provided CN temporary surges in traffic, but by 1969 the train was losing $14 million a year. The National Transportation Act of 1967 provided CN and CP operating subsidies of 80% of operating costs, the other 20% borne by the railways. Both CN and CP applied unsuccessfully to discontinue their *Super Continental* and *Canadian* transcontinentals in 1969. The CN, however, was allowed to terminate its secondary *Panorama* the following January.

Passenger-train deficits and subsidies continued to grow and in 1976, the Canadian Transport Commission recommended that CN and CP develop a plan to consolidate passenger operations. Ottawa would provide full funding for the trains, but CN and CP would continue to manage them. CN rejected the proposal as unworkable and as Vice President of Passenger Marketing Garth Campbell recalled, "The only way we are going to beat Ottawa is to have the public on our side. . . Let's give this thing a new image." But it wasn't to be a simple as that.

And so "VIA CN" was created, the railroad's second attempt at rebranding. The first equipment to emerge in VIA livery were banana-yellow Turbo Trains in April 1976, followed by more sedate yellow-striped blue paint on conventional equipment. Plans to absorb CP operations within CN's new division were evident in VIA's first timetable, published in October, though CN-CP operations remained separate.

## VIA COMES INTO ITS OWN

VIA Rail Canada became a separate CN-owned subsidiary in February 1977, though it would take another year before operational and labor agreements with CP were completed. On April 1, 1978, the federal government acquired CN's VIA


**The eastbound *Super Continental* flows along with the North Thompson River near McClure, July 5, 1976.**

Rail operations, creating a new Crown corporation charted to consolidate CN and CP passenger services. Acquisition of CP assets followed in October.

Under new management, VIA's *Super Continental* became a Montreal-Vancouver train, while the *Canadian* operated Toronto-Vancouver. During their leisurely four-hour crossover/layover in Winnipeg, Montreal and Toronto sleepers were switched between the two trains, providing essentially the same service as before. (A few years later, eastern destinations switched, with the *Super Continental* terminating in Toronto, the *Canadian* in Montreal.)

No longer buried in corporate balance sheets, VIA subsidies became more political despite a substantial increase in ridership. Bending to political pressures, Minister of Transport Jean-Luc Pepin mandated a 40% reduction in VIA operations in 1981.

While most of the nine trains eliminated were in eastern Canada, the west was not spared: the *Super Continental* made its last runs on Nov. 15. The *Canadian* was switched to a longer Montreal-Toronto-Vancouver route and, to provide essential ("protected") services, a series of day trains operated west of Winnipeg to Saskatoon and Edmonton, where the newly minted *Skeena* continued on to Jasper and Prince Rupert. Twice-daily RDCs went to Calgary.

As a more western-friendly government came to power, VIA restored *Super Continental* service on May 31, 1985, but only as far east as Winnipeg, where connections were made with the *Canadian*. The *Super* was certainly not "Continental" anymore, its Sceneramic domes replaced with CP Skyline domes. Off-season tri-weekly service fared poorly, sometimes running as few as six cars.

Between 1981 and 1988, VIA per-passenger subsidies doubled, forcing CTC Minister Benoit Bouchard to reduce VIA operations by 55%. Despite protests, both the *Canadian* and *Super Continental* made their last runs on Jan. 14, 1990.

In what might be considered a compromise, the next day, a tri-weekly train began service over the *Super Continental*'s route to Toronto with a mostly *Canadian* consist. VIA chose to name it the *Canadian*, perhaps because it looked like one, but we weren't fooled.

While the *Super Continental* was never as celebrated as its fancy domed, stainless-steel rival, it carried far more passengers thanks to CN's innovative approach to comfort, fares, and convenience. May-


**A tad off its 6 a.m. scheduled arrival in Kamloops, B.C., eastbound VIA CN No. 4 waits for a westbound train to pass at Kissick, 6 miles west of town. This version of CN's VIA locomotive scheme has a yellow pilot, obviously not weathering well. Subsequent repaints had black pilots.**

be not "super" in the strictest sense, but you can still ride it today.

I still visit B.C., but encounters with VIA's *Canadian* are few and far between since it runs through the Fraser-Thompson canyons at night. Freight locomotives in the New Image livery harken to a time when privately owned passenger service might have made a comeback.

In retrospect, my encounters with the *Super Continental* were all too short, for the winds of change finally brought some measure of sanity to passenger train economics. Canadian railroading is less distinctive than it used to be, but once upon a time, I found a beautiful, magical place where transcontinental streamliners wound their way down impossibly steep canyons with no apparent urgency, as if frozen in time.

*T. O. Repp is a retired Boeing engineer living near Gig Harbor, Wash. He is author of "Main Streets of the Northwest" and former editor of Northern Pacific Historical Society's Mainstreeter magazine.*

**A westbound *Super* threads through Skoonka Tunnels along the Thompson River in British Columbia on April 13, 1975. To navigate the steep, unstable cliffs, Canadian National built three tunnels and four rock sheds totaling 1,750 feet in a stretch of only 2,112 feet of track.**