

NORTH AMERICA'S LAST TRUE MIXED TRAIN

Mixed Train to Pukatawagan

DENIS E. CONNELL/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

UNDETERRED BY THE MISTY RAIN, Michelle Rounds navigates the station platform with a spring in her step of a woman on a mission. It's Monday, October 6, 2015, and the ragtag consist of Keewatin Railway Train 291 is at the station platform in The Pas, Manitoba, waiting for its 11:00 a.m. departure. Before that can happen, Michelle is tasked with inspecting the lavatories of Keewatin Central's four ex-VIA coaches for soap, towels, and running water. "It's a two-day round-trip to Pukatawagan and when the train is full, as today it is, the cars come back pretty dirty. We do what we can."

It will be a long day ahead for the crew and passengers on North America's last working mixed train, a bi-weekly conveyance serving the First Nation populations of Pukatawagan, Man., 160 rail miles north-northwest of The Pas.

Where Is The Pas?

Located approximately 505 rail miles west of Winnipeg, The Pas (pronounced "Pah") is the approximate midpoint of the former Canadian National branch reaching 1,000 miles northward to the port of Churchill on Hudson Bay. Shed by CN in 1997, the line is presently operated by OmniTRAX subsidiary Hudson Bay Railway (HBR). Principal commodities moved by Hudson Bay are grain products to the port of Churchill for transload during the shipping season and minerals from two branchlines at Thompson and Flin Flon. The Keewatin Railway Company was formed by First Nation tribes in 2006 to purchase the 185-mile Sherridon Subdivision from HBR and become the operator of bi-weekly mixed Trains 290 and 291.

Trackage north of Pukatawagan once reached another 85 miles to Lynn Lake,

and mixed train service (sarcastically dubbed "The Bullet" by veteran railroaders because of its glacial pace) survived until 2002 when the mines at Lynn Lake closed.

Canada's national passenger operator, VIA Rail, consistent with its federal mandate to provide "remote services," retracted mixed train service to Lynn Lake but retained it to Pukatawagan, an isolated First Nation reserve of 2,600. The town is accessible only by railway, one very small landing strip, and in winter, a single ice road.

Most of the line north of Pukatawagan is intact, with the Keewatin Central operating special maintenance trains for Manitoba Hydro two or three times per year. Hydro facilities at Hone (milepost 136) and Dryborough (milepost 157) require periodic maintenance, and the railway is the only way to get heavy

equipment and personnel on site. Trackage north of milepost 157 is intact but unused up to milepost 182. Lynn Lake trackage south to milepost 182 has been removed, according to Keewatin Central General Manager Tom McCahill.

Riding the Mixed Train

Our scheduled departure at 11:00 a.m. is delayed, as more people show up on the platform at the last minute. Monday trips northbound tend to have heavy passenger loads, since many of the passengers are heading home to the reserve after a weekend in the city. Some passengers travel here to visit family, buy provisions, or to receive essential medical care unavailable on the reserve.

The train crew is patient and accommodating, and when all are aboard and baggage stowed, we head west five miles to the connection with the Flin Flon Sub. Today's consist is

powered by HBR GP40 No. 3005 (ex-CN 9634), Kelona Pacific GP40 No. 2632 (leased from GMTX), one boxcar for the Northern Store in Pukatawagan, KRC boxcar No. 410581 for overflow baggage, one trailer on flatcar (TOFC), and the "fish" car, followed by ex-VIA baggage car No. 9631, coach No. 3248, combine No. 5649, and combine No. 5648 as the conductor's car.

The first northbound stop today will be at the Cranberry Portage station, since nobody flagged us down as we passed through Root Lake and Atik this trip. Two ballast hoppers are waiting for pickup in the small yard just before the station. In ten minutes, the crew has switched in the two loaded hoppers, reassembled the train and eased into the station where 30 new passengers board.

Two miles ahead, the crew receives permission to enter Keewatin Central trackage at Sherritt Junction. Hudson



OPPOSITE: From the dutch door near Takipi, Man., mixed Train 291 is seen at track speed during a brief burst of sun on October 6, 2015. Six freight cars trail the two units, with four VIA passenger and baggage cars behind them.

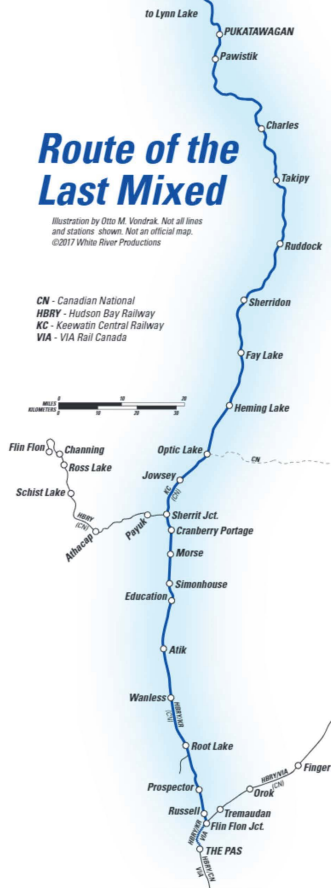
ABOVE: Train 291 will be pretty full today after the long weekend in The Pas. An additional boxcar is in the consist to handle overflow baggage.

LEFT: The Cranberry Portage station stop on the southbound trip requires the setout of two empty ballast hoppers in today's consist. In two days, the cars will be loaded for the next northbound train. The Keewatin Railway is constantly maintaining the tracks to increase speeds and keep the train's journey down to nine or ten hours each way.

Route of the Last Mixed

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2017 White River Productions

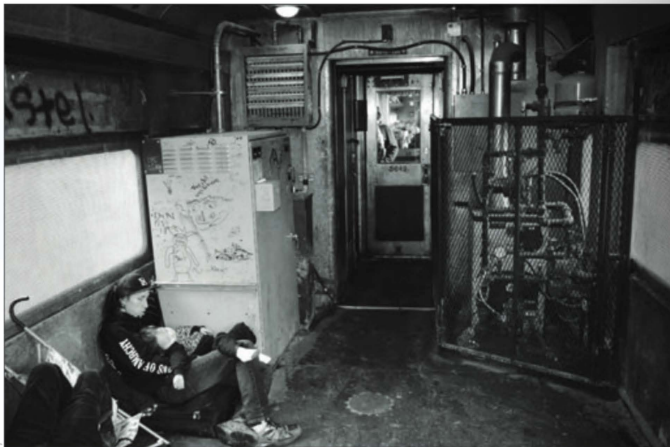
CN - Canadian National
 HBRV - Hudson Bay Railway
 KC - Keewatin Central Railway
 VIA - VIA Rail Canada



Bay Railway takes the left fork at the junction to remove raw ore two to three times per week from the now-closed smelter in Flin Flon, 33 miles distant; our train stays to the right.

Scenery along the Keewatin Central is rugged lake country, largely untouched by the modern world except for an occasional dirt road. Tamarac trees (resembling Colorado Aspens) are indigenous to the area surrounding the right-of-way and the occasional hunter's cabin.

Today's train orders call for the two ballast hoppers to be dumped north of Sherridon at milepost 40.3. Conductor Laurie Scribner and trainman Phil Hanratty coordinate their efforts to spread the ballast efficiently before setting out the empty cars and getting underway again at 4:39 p.m. Maintenance-of-way crews will follow



TOP: As the primary lifeline to the region it serves, the mixed train is often crowded and noisy. When the train is full and you need a quiet place to nap, the combine is the perfect solution despite its gritty condition. **ABOVE:** Friendly passengers catch a breath of fresh air in the vestibule near Takipy. New visitors are quickly picked out, and one passenger asked, "Why are you going to Puk?" A brief explanation can be difficult.

up in a few days to finish the work with a tampo stored on a nearby siding. Tomorrow's Train 290 will grab the empty hoppers on the southbound run for return to Cranberry Portage. Track maintenance is a priority on the Keewatin Central, and the railroad takes every opportunity to upgrade the property. The Keewatin Central has worked to keep track speeds up, with 25 m.p.h. permitted between Sherritt Junction (milepost 0) and Optic Lake

(milepost 12.7). Track speed from Optic Lake to Sherridon (milepost 40.3) is 35 m.p.h. Sherridon to Pukatawagan (milepost 99.1) is 20 m.p.h. Under CN and VIA operation, track speeds had fallen, and Trains 290/291 routinely took 12 or more hours to reach their destination. Enhanced maintenance programs have improved timekeeping, with most trips taking between nine and ten hours, including stops, setoffs, and pickups.

The First Nation passengers aboard



ABOVE: Trainman Phil Hanratty checks the door hop on the "fish car" before pickup at Pawistik (milepost 94) on the southbound run on October 7, 2015. The fish car is dropped on the northbound run and the local fishermen fill it overnight. The car is a standard boxcar filled with tubs of ice to transport the fresh catch to market in The Pas. **LEFT:** Sherridon station is a quick stop on the southbound run. Each stop usually requires unloading material from one of the baggage cars on the train.

alcohol importation. Everything was peaceful and orderly throughout the trip. Periodically, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ride the train as well as part of its community policing initiative, according to Constable Steven Holt of the RCMP Pukatawagan detachment.

Morning rain and clouds give way to partial sun punctuated by puffy white clouds and the opportunity for some dutch door photography. A left-leaning curve at Takipy (milepost 60) provides the opportunity to get the entire consist in full sun. Just after dark, 291 stops to discharge an intrepid hunter at milepost 87 between Charles and Rafter. Once on the ground, he disappeared into the boreal darkness of the Manitoba forest as Conductor Scribner orders us underway. One more stop at Pawistik to drop off the "fish car" precedes our 9:15 p.m. arrival at Pukatawagan.

291 are inquisitive at the sight of a 60-ish outsider with a camera, with nearly everyone asking "Why are you going to Puk?" Remembering Jim Boyd's famous quote on the impossibility of explaining the purpose of railfanning, I simply reply that I am "writing an article." A few ask not to be photographed while others volunteer cheerfully.

A majority of today's passengers are members of the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation. Vestibules are open and jammed

with smokers. Many of the passengers nap and a few participate in small-stakes card games. North of Cranberry Portage, a small commissary opens in one combine with snacks and drinks available for the long trip to Puk.

Over the years, I had heard many railfan rumors about the Puk mixed; none were complimentary. Victor Colomb, a Pukatawagan Tribal Police Officer, was aboard for security and to enforce tribal regulations on

Train time at Pukatawagan is a big deal. More than 100 people are there to greet the train, pick up loved ones, and collect provisions from the baggage car. A four-wheeled quad emerges from the extra boxcar, along with vehicle parts, food coolers, and lumber. The engine crew switches out the TOFC car carrying lumber and home building materials for pickup tomorrow on an adjacent ramp track. The Northern Store has employees working to empty its dedicated boxcar into waiting pickups and vans. With only a small airstrip and winter ice road, Pukatawagan's most reliable lifeline

to the outside world is this train. By 9:45, all is quiet and the station area is deserted.

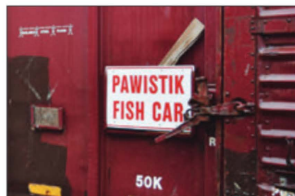
Tuesday, October 7, dawns cold and clear in Pukatawagan, with Train 290 scheduled to depart at 10:00 a.m. Today's passenger load is light and senior engineer Ernie Foster, a 40-year veteran of both CN and HBR, gets underway "on the advertised." At Pawistik (milepost 94), we stop at the fish house siding to pick up the fish car set out from last night. Pawistik translates as "rapids" or "current" in Cree, the indigenous language of the First Nation people.

The Fish Car

Northern Manitoba is blessed with abundant natural resources that provide sustenance for the indigenous peoples of this remote region. The fish house siding at Pawistik is serviced on every trip during the spring and fall fishing seasons. A standard KCR boxcar loaded with tubs of ice is set out on the northbound trip. Overnight, Cree fishermen fill the car with freshly caught walleye, pickerel, and trout to be forwarded south the next day.

Upon arrival at The Pas, the fish car is switched out to the Freshwater Fish

RIGHT: The "Fish Car" boxcar is added to the southbound consist at Pawistik. Ahead of the fish car are two ballast cars that were emptied on the previous day's northbound trip. **BELOW:** The fish car is clearly marked by a sign on the door. **BOTTOM:** Northbound Train 291 stops short of the Cranberry Portage station to pick up two ballast hoppers. Later today, the train crew will spread that rock north of Sherridon at milepost 43.



ABOVE: It's 9:20 p.m. and Train 291 has arrived at the station at Pukatawagan. More than 100 people are on hand to collect their provisions and loved ones. The trip from The Pas has taken almost 12 hours on this day, since there were pickups and setouts to be made all along the route as well as some maintenance work dropping ballast. The Puk train is truly the last working mixed train in North America. **LEFT:** Government investment helps preserve this important transportation conduit serving the remote region north of The Pas.

North America's Last Mixed Train

Riding the Puk mixed is a wonderful anachronism in modern railroading. Mixed trains were once common in an era when railroads throughout North America valued their distant communities and the services provided to them.

Make no mistake, the trip to Puk is a hardcore one from start to finish. You can get to The Pas on triweekly VIA train 693 from Winnipeg, arriving at 1:45 a.m. I took the train and found it to be very comfortable, especially in the *Park-series* car used as a first-class lounge in high season. The Pas is a medium-sized town with a hospital, shopping malls, gas stations, and hotels.

You will need to prepare yourself if you are going to ride the mixed train to Puk. Bring any food and drink you'll need for the two-day journey. Other than the part-time train commissary, there are no food facilities north of The Pas.

Lodging in Pukatawagan isn't scarce — it's nonexistent. There are no hotels in town, but camping near the station area is permitted and likely your only option if you choose to visit. Late spring to early fall is the only practical time for camping, since the winter season is a long, snowy interlude with temperatures routinely sinking to -30°F. Warm clothing and hiking boots are useful in

this rugged country. Cellular service is adequate up to Cranberry Portage; north of there satellite phone service is the most reliable form of communication.

Tickets to ride the train are reasonably priced at C\$40 each way, available for purchase at The Pas station. Call the Keewatin Central at (204) 623-5255 or visit their website at www.kcrail.ca for updated information.

As I walk down the platform thinking back fondly on my journey of the past two days, the words of Gordon Lightfoot's "Canadian Railroad Trilogy" resonate in my mind. *There was a time in this fair land when the railroad did not run/ When the wild majestic mountains stood alone against the sun/ Long before the white man and long before the wheel/ When the green dark forest was too silent to be real.*

I'm off to the hotel for a few hours of sleep and soon will be back on this same platform to catch VIA Train 693 to Churchill, a place where polar bears roam. That's a story for another time. ☐

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