



QNS&L: ore else!

BY DUNCAN DU FRESNE

As part of the continuing efforts to acquire additional passenger cars for the NMST/BRS excursion train, the Bytown Railway Society decided to follow up on an offer made by the Quebec, North Shore and Labrador Railway (QNS&L) for an ex-CPR 2100-series coach at Sept-Iles, Quebec. This writer and Joe Toscas were chosen to visit the QNS&L in Sept-Iles and inspect the equipment. No doubt this came about as a result of this "dreadful duos'" successful venture to Sault Ste. Marie early in 1988 to obtain Algoma Central articulated car 458-459. In any event on the evening of December 8, 1988, Joe and I boarded an Inter-Canadian Convair 580 flight for Quebec City and Sept-Iles.

The morning of December 9 dawned bright and cold in Sept-Iles. Joe and I drove to the QNS&L yard and soon found the passenger station and impressive corporate headquarters building. Of even more interest was QNS&L (ex-ONR) No. 702, a light Pacific steam locomotive, and the little Gulf Pulp & Paper Company Davenport slide valve 0-6-0 No. 48. Both of these gems are located on a raised area within a fenced-in enclosure in the centre of a large parking lot between the station and the HQ building. Both engines were decorated with coloured Christmas lights. With an ample snow cover on the ground and the much-colder-than-Ottawa temperatures, they looked really fine.

Our first order of business was to meet with the Superintendent of Equipment and Maintenance, Mr. Keith Turriff. It was not long before we had been given a cup of coffee off a trolley that did the rounds, and were down to the business of obtaining passenger cars. In very short order Mr. Turriff had the Trainmaster, Mr. Jim Sirois, in his office and a plan was hastily prepared to ensure that:

a) we saw the three or four passenger cars of interest;

18,000 HP: Four SD40-2s (Nos. 245, 257, 228 and one other), helped by two mid-train remote-controlled sisters, bring a fully loaded ore train into Sept-Iles yard in full dynamic braking on June 18, 1981. Photo by David Strenes.

b) we saw all other equipment of interest to us in order to update the **Canadian Trackside Guide**;

c) we saw any shop and other plant facilities of interest to us;

d) we rode an ore train the following day (Saturday);

e) another meeting (on Friday) was arranged for us to meet with Mr. Jean-Pierre Maltais, Manager of Corporate and Public Affairs.

We left the Superintendent's office with Jim, climbed aboard a company van (truck), and began our tour of the enormous layout known as the Sept-Iles yard. Jim took us to the four available passenger cars - two were in one location, the other two were a long distance away. All the cars were jammed in by other equipment which made inspection of their ends near impossible. Mechanically and structurally the cars were remarkably good, especially when one considers the lack of any real maintenance they've received in recent years. Discouraging, to say the least, was what we saw when we went inside. Sixteen of the seats had been removed in order to provide space for three oil-fired heaters, a water tank and heater, and other paraphernalia. End compartments housed oil tanks, and other filth covered bits and pieces. Lavatories sort of existed, some with one hopper, some with two, and in one case none. Wash basins, one per car, looked like they were intended to be used in a bar, not a railway car. They were installed in a very non-railroad wooden "box". The floor

covering wasn't the best, the walls were a disaster and to crown it all off, three stove pipes went through the ceiling above the stoves. All of this in what was once a very modern, smooth-sided, arch roofed, air conditioned car. The air-conditioning system had long gone the way of the steam heating system. In deference to all this though, all windows were in place, as were the luggage racks, lights, doors, platforms, dutch doors and traps, and diaphragms. There didn't appear to be any real signs of water damage due to leaking roofs either. Wheels, trucks, the air brake system and draft gear also appeared to be generally in good shape. All framing under the car bodies looked remarkably good.

Joe and I photographed what we saw, made various notes and left with Jim for our tour in the snow. We were glad Jim knew what was under the snow, for much of the time we were not driving on any sort of road. We saw the diesel shops and the car dumper building (both outside), the 250-ton auxiliary outfit, the track geometry car, the one and only business car, the VIA baggage car (ex-VIA 9601) that had carried John Diefenbaker's body from Ottawa to Saskatoon, a satellite dish car (I'm not kidding!), two snow plows, two Jordan spreaders, a scale test car, a tool car, an amazing number of various types of Maintenance of Way and Communications gang cars, all of which were former passenger cars from a variety of sources, but mainly Canadian Pacific. We saw the "Rail Pusher" outfit and the LORAM rail-grinding train, out of service GP9 units, robot cars, cabooses (cabeese?), the summer "excursion train equipment" (all ex-Southern stainless steel, complete with QNS&L stove pipes) and a dome car. Only the "diner" was not Southern, its heritage was CP. As usual, the QNS&L did not retain either air-conditioning or steam heating on any of this reasonably modern equipment. We also saw the regular service passenger train - two ex-Southern cars and two ex-CPR. This service operates between Sept-Iles and Schefferville, more than 350 miles, on a railway which permits a passenger train to travel at a maximum speed of 45 MPH - and for the most part slower. A very long trip.

Saturday morning Jim picked us up in a company truck at our hotel and drove us to the QNS&L diesel shop where we met Bill Demeau, the engineer on the extra north ore empty we were to ride to Tika (57 miles north of Sept-Iles). Bill was a jovial sort who hailed from Campbellton, N.B. He told us he had been an engineman with the CN, as had his father whom he'd fired for on CN steam power. His grandfather had also been a hogger on the railway. Bill was putting in his last few years on the QNS&L before retirement to his fishing and hunting lodge back in his native New Brunswick. The rest of the crew soon arrived - Leo the conductor and Bob the brakeman. We did not see too much of either of them as they would ride the second of the two SD40-2s that were to be our motive power. This was just one more kind gesture from "the boys" as they wanted us to have the cab of the lead unit to ourselves, along with Bill.

We climbed aboard the 249, the lead unit, and after some switching picked up a van on the nose of the unit and left Sept-Iles, caboose hop, for Arnaud Jct., 8.3 miles north. At the Junction, two other QNS&L SD40-2s were waiting for us with a 120-car train of identical empty covered ore concentrate hoppers. These are three-unit sets of cars with semi-permanent drawbars. Effectively we had a train of 40 three-unit sets. The train was a Wabush Mining Company train from Point Noire. Bill explained that an agreement between the Compagnie Minière IOC (The Iron Ore Company of Canada - operators of the QNS&L) and Wabush Mining, resulted in the Wabush trains being handled by the QNS&L between Wabush Jct. (near Labrador City) and Arnaud Jct. It took 40 minutes to pump the air up on those cars, which was followed by an equally long brake test. Bill explained during the brake test that maximum leakage must not exceed 4 pounds in 45 seconds. He did the test with the automatic brake valve in lap, as usual, but with the additional precaution of cutting out the feed valve. Very interesting.

Following the successful test, Bill gently eased the mile of empties into motion. Leo got off the lead unit and wished Joe and I a good trip. We pulled out at about 8 MPH as Bill kept the train in check until the tail end, now adorned with two cabeese, cleared the Jct. and entered "the main".

We were finally on our way. Bill widened on the throttle to get the mass in motion and then eased off as the track is generally, and slightly, downgrade at this point. We crossed the one and only level crossing we were to see. Speed was checked as required (not very often) by judicious use of the dynamic brake and the throttle. Not once in the tortuous 57 miles while we were on board did Bill apply the air! In a few minutes Bill announced "there's the tunnel", and sure enough we were heading through, rather than around, a mountain of frozen rock. Although only 2,192 feet in length, it is for want of any other description, the doorway to the QNS&L mainline. As we emerged from the tunnel we began crossing the high deck girder bridge over the turbulent Moisie River. From our vantage point in the cab of that SD40-2, the only appropriate comment that could be made about the scene that confronted us was "Oh my God!". Joe must have said "unbelievable" 20 times, while I was his echo. Bill just smiled. Here we were in a frozen land, on a massively-built railway that was curving back and forth on a ledge, high above the rolling waters of the Moisie. Mountains of rock on both sides of us, evergreen trees clinging to life everywhere, great high frozen solid water falls all over the place. Joe and I were bug-eyed. My 35 mm camera clicked away and Joe kept his video camera trained (a pun) on the track and geography ahead. While we were busy with this, Bill was steady as the rock we were passing over in adjusting the power to keep his train stretched or bunched, as required, with no slack run-ins or run-outs. Watching Bill's masterful handiwork was like watching the Maestro get the best from a symphony orchestra. We were impressed. Mil

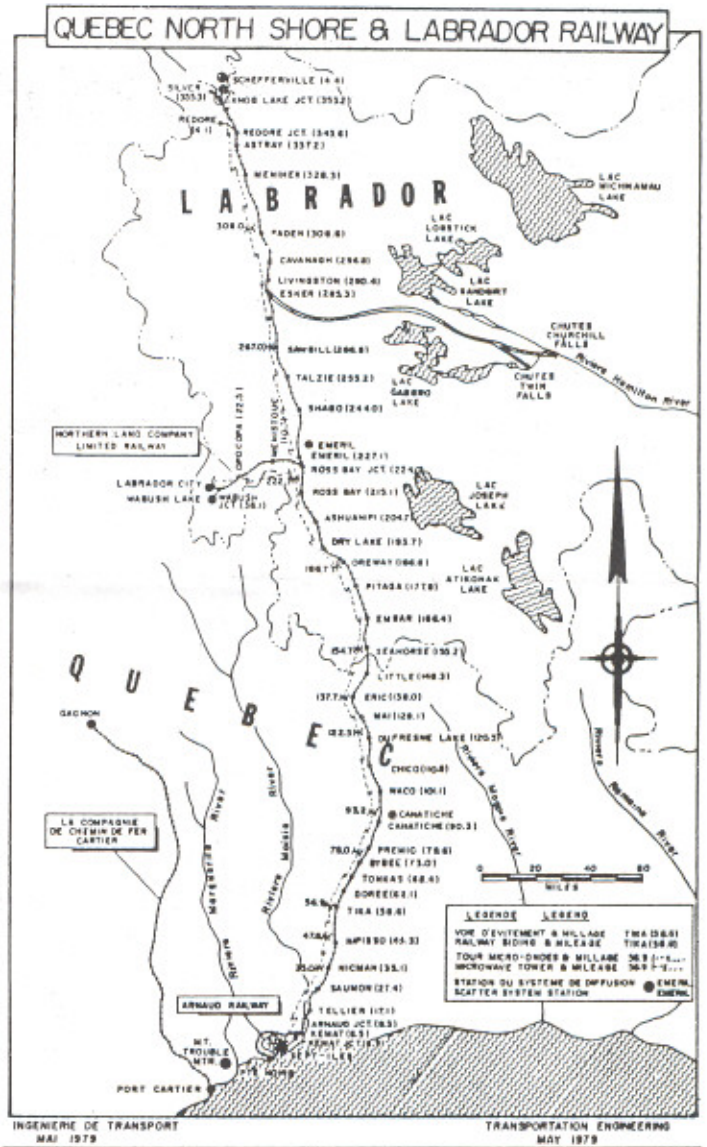
after mile passed as Bill held to the 30 MPH speed limit where he could. Joe and I took pictures looking back along the train in those few places where there was sufficient room to see most of it. Bill pointed out the one and only cabins to be seen, right on a spit of land in the salmon-filled Moisie, owned by the Adams people - the ones who make Chiclets!

As we neared mile 36, Bill almost as an afterthought, said something about a bunch of old boarding cars and other equipment at Nicman. Another "Oh my God" situation. There, in the wilderness, were lines of old passenger cars. I had no trouble identifying the former CP 6-wheel truck cars, and was shocked to see one I couldn't identify. In the failing light and half hidden by the trees was an old open-vestibule car on the end of one of the lines. A ghost maybe? Nope - failing light, trees and all, it was for real.

As we rolled north, the fantastically rugged scenery never gave up. We passed dragging equipment and hot box detectors, flange oilers, and continuous green signals on this CTC-equipped extra heavyduty railway. All too soon Bill was slowing the train down so that Joe and I, and Jim on the trailing unit, could get off. We were at Tika, mile 56.8, the absolute middle of nowhere, and 1 hour and 50 minutes north of Arnaud Jct. We hit the deck, waved farewell to our friends as Bill was pouring on the power to climb the grade staring him in the face. A short walk in the -30 degree c temperature and pure white snow took us into Camp 58. The camp is a group of mobile metal buildings, bolted together, providing complete living quarters for M of W and other personnel. The kitchen was brightly lit and sparkling clean. Bedrooms, bathroom and a lounge made up the rest. There were some other cabin-like buildings around the main building, but they were deserted. The ever present (on the QNS&L) satellite dish sat in a clearing beside the camp.

As we drank some good coffee and ate some homemade pie, we listened to Jim tell us about the QNS&L in the early days (early to mid-1950s). He also told us a few funnies about his days with CN. Seems like he got to places like Brent, Depot Harbour and North Bay. He also worked out of Rivière du Loup on the south side of the St. Lawrence. Jim, also a qualified engineman on the QNS&L, told us about his handling of a test ore train consisting of 286 cars, or was it 288 (would it make any difference)? We're talking about a total train weight of something approaching 37,000 tons! Not only that, it was well over two miles in length on a railway that has just a few curves and grades!

All too soon we were brought back to the present by the blast of air horns. Our southbound loaded ore train was approaching to pick us up. We left the warmth of the kitchen and walked over the crunching snow to trackside. There she was, 232 loaded cars of ore pellets. On the head end was the 263 and 225 (SD40-2s - what else?). Ninety cars back, two more SD40-2s spliced by a robot car, provided "mid-train" power. The train was two



miles in length and slightly longer on tonnage by QNS&L standards, where 240 loads of iron ore pellets is the norm. But nonetheless, at approximately 30,000 tons this was the longest and heaviest train I'd ever been on. A whole different ball game from our northbound trip with the empties, this train was nearly twice as long and nearly ten times as heavy. With the mid-train "slave" units, it is possible to have the head-end power in dynamic brake mode while the mid-train slaves are in power mode. Our engineer was Bob Moir. Bob was at the other end of the seniority list from Bill Demeau, being about 30 years of age. We didn't really meet Bob. Although we got on the lead unit at Tika, we simply walked through the cab, down the snow and ice covered running board of the 263, across the plate over the couplings, and into the cab of trailing 225. There we did meet our conductor - George Ferguson. He sure had me fooled, for he is as French as I, with a name like du Fresne, an English! But, like everyone else we'd met on the pike, another great guy. He and Jim held down the right side of the cab, while Joe and I took up residence on the left. Both George and Jim regaled us with what might best be described as "tales of the

QNS&L", going back all the way to the road's construction days. Unlike some of the other railroaders, George was a Sept-Iles native, and a QNS&L original.

Leaving Tika on a slight descending grade isn't all that impressive, even on the head end of a 30,000 ton train. Little power is used, just enough to get the mass moving. Maximum speed for this train, anywhere, is 25 MPH. Again, as we observed with Bill, train control is effected by careful control of the power and limited use of the dynamic brake. A minute detailed knowledge of every inch of the road is essential for an engineer here. It was quite dark leaving Tika and in a very few miles it was black. It gets dark real early in these latitudes at this time of year. The sky was beautiful. We could see every star with startling clarity, there being no haze or pollution in the air - a very unusual sight for us city dwellers.

As the 263 wound its way back and forth around the curves ahead of us, we could see its headlight picking out the frozen ruggedness of the wilderness. We realized that the desolate beauty of the place is very real, day or night. By the way, no ditch lights are used on the QNS&L. Another thing that was missing on the QNS&L was the use of the locomotive bell and air horn. The familiar 14L signal isn't all that familiar here - few crossings! Sure does keep the noise down in the cab, but not for long. Soon we reached a point midway between Saumon and Tellier, around mile 20, and the relative quiet of our rolling giant changed. Up ahead, around a curve, unseen and unknown to us foreigners, the line began to rise, and continued to rise for the next 12 miles. On the 263, Bob was calling for power, all we had. Transition went down and amperage went up as load and grade met. The four 645s howled and bellowed in eager response to Bob's command. Twelve thousand horsepower, purposeful and deliberate, poured out current to 24 traction motors. We were moving at 15 MPH, slowly, ponderously, but we were maintaining our road speed. It was impressive - the display of raw power, the stillness of a cold winter's night in the wilderness being shattered by the booming roar of powerful engines, the whine of bull and pinion gears and traction motors, and, above it all, the turbochargers in full song. Mile after mile of this performance continued as we curved left and right around the rocks. Sitting in the darkened cab, mesmerized by the harmonics in the steady roar of well-designed machinery almost made me forget about the 232 loaded ore cars trailing behind, and about the two

mid-train units also slugging it out 90 cars back. Very soon I saw lights at trackside up ahead. It was the deck girder bridge over the Moisie River and immediately beyond it, the entrance to the tunnel. Over the bridge we went, holding a steady 15 MPH with the throttle still in "Run 8" and right into the tunnel. Now if we had been stirring things up before, we were really doing a number inside that tunnel.

I was thrilled by it all. It's hardly in the same league as being in the cab of a CPR 2800 Hudson with a thousand tons behind the tender drawbar, screaming across a subdivision at 90 per. No, this was quite different. Sixty-four cylinders of engines, not 2, 15 MPH not 90, sophisticated electronics not a simple turbo generator, 48 driving wheels not 6, and nearly 6 times the tractive effort (at 15 MPH). I will not forget either experience. What a difference from running a single RS-2 Alco/GE unit on train 83 between Ottawa and Smiths Falls in the mid-1950s. To put things in proper perspective, however, and disregarding all economic and operational considerations, let's not forget the DM&IR used to haul 16,000 ton trains (180 loaded ore "jennies") with a single 2-8-8-4 "Yellowstone" steam locomotive built in 1937. Not bad.

After exiting the tunnel we only had a few more miles to go before we would reach the crest of the long slow ascent, and then begin our slow descent into the Sept-Iles yard. Bob began to ease off as he went from maximum power to idle, for a short time, and then into dynamic braking. At this point the head end of the train was in compression, while the tail end was in tension. Careful train control is imperative in these sorts of situations if you aren't going to leave broken drawbars all over the place. But no need to worry, Bob had control of the situation as he very slowly reduced our speed from 15 MPH to 10 as we entered the yard. Since we had left Tika, not one single application of the air brakes had been made. From the perspective of an old steam man, I just marvel at what's possible with dynamic braking.

Our trip, as short as it was, was a special treat. Joe and I want our new friends in Sept-Iles to know how much we appreciated their hospitality and their willingness to go out of their way to be helpful. A grand group of people running a spectacular operation with no fanfare. Really, when you stop and think about it, would you expect anything else?

CABOOSE HOP: SD40-2s 251 and 253 were photographed by David Stremes as they pushed a steel van north out of Sept-Iles enroute to Arnaud Jct. to pick up empty ore cars on June 18, 1981.

