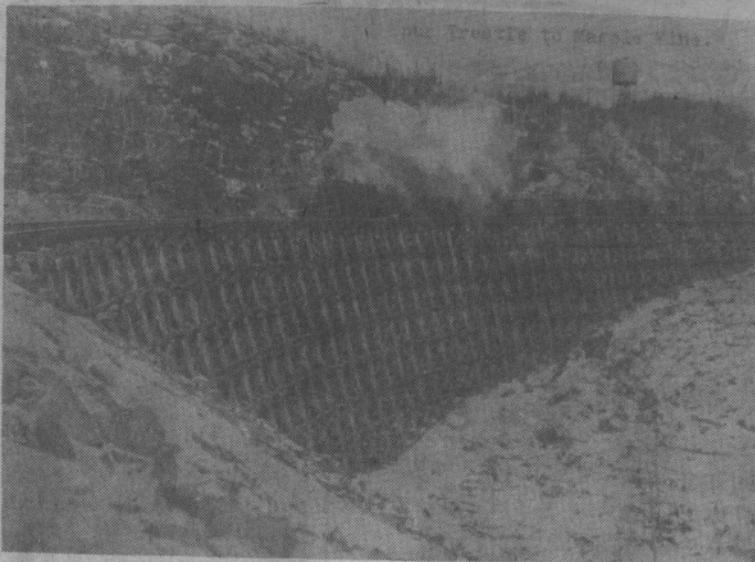


Tracks Of The Black Bear



A BOOK REVIEW

Donald E. Pugh

TRACKS OF THE BLACK BEAR, the story of the Algoma Central Railway, by Dale Wilson (Green Tree Publishing, 1974) is now available at the Book Shop. Dale Wilson, a Sudbury school teacher and veteran of eleven Algoma Central summers, has succeeded in providing an excellent overview of the railway. Unlike the prairies, settlement of Algoma was not spearheaded by hardy farmers. The developmental force came from Sault Ste. Marie, under the direction and entrepreneurship of Francis Clergue. He schemed and built the Sault into a major central entrepot; a thriving supply depot which manufactured and sold a multitude of paraphernalia needed for a vast hinterland of interior lumbering, mining and agricultural camps. In return the Sault received minerals and pulpwood to feed the mouths of profitable processing plants.

The railway, initially built in 1900 from the Helen and Josephine Mines to Michipicoten Harbour, carried iron ore to Lake Superior. By 1903, rails had reached 56 miles north of the Sault where the railhead remained until 1909. By 1912 the railway had reached Hawk and was extended to Hearst by 1914. Lack of settlement and industry during the 1920's scotched plans to construct to James Bay. Subsequently, in 1932 the Ontario Northland proved to be the first and only Ontario railway to reach salt water. The ACR's major source of early income proved to be coal shipped north from Michipicoten Harbour to supply the C.N.R. and pulp and paper towns. The disappearance of the Lake Superior Co. in the mid 1930's turned the A.C.R. into an independent operation. The major event to bring its prosperity was the reopening of the Helen Mine in Wawa in 1939, thus ensuring profitable regular traffic between Wawa and Sault Ste. Marie.

Dale Wilson has succeeded in accumulating many interesting anecdotes. The Algoma Central and Hudson Bay (ACHB) or All Curves and Hard Bumps, probably gained its emblem from the many black bears frequently encountered near the tracks. The type of employee originally hired, according to one old railroader, were gentlemen-roughnecks selected by their ability to drink and fight. No one is quite sure where the railway gained its many section names. It's been suggested that names such as Mokitina, Mashkode and Ogidaki came from a Welshman speaking Russian with an Aberdeen accent.

The railway was once used for a funeral in Sault Ste. Marie. Even today the A.C.R. is one of the few lines to rent private cars, complete with bars, beds and baths. Only the women are lacking for a luxurious trip to Hearst.

If Mr. Wilson had more time, it would be interesting to investigate settlement patterns along the A.C.R. Towns such as Goudreau, Franz and Oba, were once flourishing centres. The discovery of gold, iron ore and new pulpwood resources have led to many spur lines from the Algoma Central Railway and the development of transitory settlements. Rotting ties, tottering bridges, and remains of forgotten trestles leading to overgrown ghost camps are a fascinating side of the A.C.R.'s past. It is hoped that the stories of these settlements, whose pasts intertwine so closely with the railway, will soon be told.

Mr. Wilson's book sells for \$2.95.