

## Railway saved by volunteers, ORA, Chamber

I was interested to read the item in June 23 issue of The Times, marking the 25th anniversary of South Simcoe Railway. It is remarkable that such an endeavour can remain viable, especially in these times when there is ever increasing competition for leisure dollars, and even the major railways have diminishing relevance with the public.

Thank goodness for the selfless volunteers whose efforts keep the railway running. The expenses for coal, insurance and supplies must be staggering. To have a significant labour cost as well could spell the end for SSR.

As your article points out, the creation of a tourist railway between Tottenham and Beeton came about because of the visionary approach of the Tottenham & District Chamber of Commerce, leading the charge to purchase the abandoned right-of-way from Canadian National. But it's wrong to presume that was the only factor.

The concept of a heritage railway preservation somewhere in southern Ontario actually had its beginnings 44 years ago. On March 20, 1972, by supplementary Letters Patent, the Toronto Train Trip Association officially became Ontario Rail Association. Once devoted solely to promoting railway excursions, the new ORA quickly turned to the acquisition, restoration and operation of an impressive fleet of locomotives and passenger cars.

In a five-year period, with the generous cooperation of Canadian Pacific Railway, ORA's 453 volunteers purchased one steam locomotive (now SSR 1057), arranged a long-term lease for another (now SSR 136), and purchased or had donated 20 pieces of rolling stock. The two steam locomotives were rebuilt and returned to main line operating condition. They were used on 25 main line excursions, hauling ORA's fleet of seven operable passenger coaches and one business car.

When ultimately CPR was unable to continue hosting ORA's operations (we had been using the roundhouse which remains in place to this day at the foot of the CN Tower), the rolling stock went into storage and ORA's search for a permanent operating home was begun.

In the final analysis, today's South Simcoe Railway would not exist if not for the efforts of Ontario Rail Association in gathering the collection together in the first place. Nor would it exist if not for the TDCC efforts in acquiring a suitable track on which to operate it.

As your article notes, the ORA equipment was moved to Tottenham in 1986. But it took many years of hard work, again by ORA volunteers, until the first train operated in 1992.

The track had to be rehabilitated; the locomotives and cars had to be brought back to operating condition; a station was donated to the railway and moved to the site, as was a school portable to serve as a gift shop; perhaps most important was a Private Member's Bill in the Ontario Legislature giving operating authority to the South Simcoe Railway (which even today uses the Ontario Rail Association charter, renamed to acknowledge its new home); and objections to the Ontario Municipal Board regarding the new railway were successfully resolved without need for a public hearing.

So yes, SSR today deserves justifiable credit for operating successfully for 24 years. But without the legacy of Ontario Rail Association, the Tottenham Chamber's purchase of the CN line would today be little more than a hiking trail.

I was an active volunteer with Ontario Rail Association from its beginning, and remain a member of South Simcoe Railway today.

**Tom Henry**

Tottenham