

The Train Enters the Station

“Oh! *Le train du nord*

Tchou tchou tchou tchou tchou tchou...

Le train du nord a perdu l' nord rendu l'aut' bord

Le train du nord a perdu l' nord et c'est pas moi qui vas l' blâmer

Non, non, non!”

Song written and sung by Félix Leclerc, “*Le train du Nord*”

The settlers had hoped for the arrival of *les gros chars* – the railway train – for such a long time that they only spoke of it with a sigh, so much so, in fact, that even the old people didn't believe it would actually arrive. And then one day... it did! The sound of its distant whistle mixed with the howls of the wolves three nights a week! From then on, the railway moved both cargo and passengers between Sainte-Agathe and Saint Jovite Station.

The date October 26, 1893, marked an important day in the annals of the village. On this official day inaugurating the railway's extension to Chute-aux-Iroquois (now the town of Labelle), personalities and villagers gathered at the new station with its neo-gothic architecture. Dressed in their best and alive with excitement, they stood on the new wooden platform, holding forth and speaking of prosperity. “This is the achievement of the dream of our late, lamented Curé Labelle,” murmured Curé Ouimet. In the corner, the manager and engineers of the Perley company were in discussion with the mayor, plotting the addition of new residences to their offices close to the station. “We'll finally be able to move our sawn timber to the United States more quickly,” added the manager, Graham, with a long sigh of satisfaction.

Hearing the growl of the train as it ran alongside the Ruisseau Noir, timid children became frightened: “It's a demon or a monster coming,” they whispered apprehensively. The only answer was a huge plume of smoke... and the train soon stopped with a fearful screeching. The little ones covered their ears and closed their eyes: it was indeed a monster, an enormous black iron horse which slowly emerged from the smoke!

The older people warmly applauded the arrival of this train, which had come especially from Montreal. It brought several dignitaries, including the Honorable Guillaume-Alphonse Nantel and the Honorable Joseph Adolphe Chapleau. A young girl advanced timidly to present Chapleau with a pretty bouquet of flowers and gave a charming speech.

For the wives of the settlers, it was the end of a long ordeal. They could now visit their families in Sainte-Agathe or Sainte-Thérèse, go to hospital in case of illness, and enjoy mail and goods that would arrive regularly. They dreamed, just for a moment, that their lives would be less difficult.

But not so fast! The railway cars were filled to capacity with merchandise, sawn timber or fire wood, not to mention mail. The few cars reserved for travelers came back on the weekends, full of city people looking to enjoy their sports and outdoor activities. For several years, the local economy moved to the beat of the train.

Ski fever swept the Laurentians in the early 20th century and eventually crossed the mountains north of Sainte-Agathe. More and more skiers from Montreal and the United States descended from the train at Saint Jovite Station for a stay at Gray Rocks Inn, a ski centre belonging to George Wheeler. In 1939, with the opening of Mont Tremblant Lodge, rich Americans also got off the train at the Lac Mercier station, on their way to Mont Tremblant.

In response to the new demand, several freight cars were slowly replaced by coaches carrying enthusiastic skiers and partygoers. This was the legendary era of the *P'tit Train du Nord*, the recreational train whose glory days ran from 1930 to 1955.

This period drew to an end in the early 1960s. The love affair with the automobile after WWII brought radical change. The era of the freight train survived a few more years, but it, too, disappeared in around 1970.

In 1978, Via Rail, working with local organizations, tried in vain to bring the legendary *P'tit Train* back to life. In 1981, the company ceased all of its activities. The stations were forgotten. As for the *P'tit Train du Nord*, singer Félix Leclerc sang that it had "disappeared in the north, north of Mont-Laurier".

In spite of all these misfortunes, people were attached to their *P'tit Train*. To save the railway's right-of-way and respond to an ever-growing desire to enjoy the outdoors, an imaginative project was developed: create a linear park! The government agreed to buy the railway's right-of-way, but funds had to be found to remove its sleepers and put the site in shape. The MRC des Laurentides called on the Gaz Métropolitain company, which obtained permission to bury its gas pipeline along the right-of-way on condition that it create a bicycle path.

The *P'tit Train du Nord* linear park was inaugurated on a beautiful Sunday in September 1996, at the Saint-Faustin *pisciculture* (fish-rearing site). Close to 103 years after the train's arrival in Saint Jovite Station, villagers again celebrated the start of a new era, rife with promise. This time, instead of traveling in the *gros chars*, they were astride their shiny bicycles! And Curé Labelle's tourists, transformed into cyclists, still love the mountains of the Laurentians, in spite of their steep slopes!

The dream of Curé Labelle, still alive in the heart of the Laurentians, continues.

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Legend: The railway station of Saint-Jovite-Station in 1893.
Source: collection of the Société du Patrimoine SOPABIC



Legend: Station platform at Saint-Jovite-Station.
Source: collection of the Société du Patrimoine SOPABIC



Legend: Skiers arrived by train and took the Villa Bellevue (Grand Lodge) bus to get to the ski trails.
Source: collection of the Société du Patrimoine SOPABIC