



Photos courtesy of Athens Area Historical Society & Museum

Left: Purcell's covered bus heads up Athens' Main St., most likely taking passengers from the B & W station to the Armstrong Hotel.



Bottom Left: Sleigh runners were switched to wheels after winter in this photo of the railway bus as it waits at the B&W to transport passengers into the village.

Below: This is a ticket stub from the Athens railway in 1903. A trip to Brockville would have cost 50 cents.



# REMEMBERING THE B&W RAILROAD

By Sally Smid

As we celebrate the 150th year of Confederation, it's interesting to note that one of the articles of agreement was the construction of an Intercolonial Railway. While the first Athens mural featuring the Athens railway yard has faded, the memories and significance of that era remain. In Edna Chant's, "As the Pages Turn" she comments, "It was perhaps the most important of all for the prosperity of the village." Early travel was slow and often treacherous, over dirt roads with horse and buggy or stage coach. Farmersville (Athens) folk first introduced the idea. With funding secured in 1888 through New York entrepreneur R. Hervey, the Brockville and Westport Railway (B & W) began service. The village attracted businessmen from Montreal to Toronto. Stops linked Lyn, Seeley's Bay, Glen Buell, Forthton, Glen Elbe, Athens, Lyndhurst, Delta, Phillipville, Forfar, Crosby, Newboro and Westport, with 40 miles of track, allowing for quicker and more economical transportation. Shipments included livestock, cheese, maple syrup, eggs and turkeys, for the famed Turkey Fair Day. Hockey teams rode the rails for competitions. Students travelled to schools in the village where they often

boarded. The B&W also transported mail, salesmen, fishermen and hunters. Ladies took shopping trips to Brockville. The B&W even ran excursions for picnics, fairs, special concerts, shows, and even funerals. One of the most poignant events was the transporting of troops during WWI. Later telegraphs arrived through that same station reporting about servicemen lost in battle. It was the station master's sad job to inform families about their fallen loved ones.

The Athens Station was located near the entrance to Centre 76 on Henry St. A horse-drawn bus was available to carry passengers and baggage into town, with wheels being traded for sleigh runners each winter. Local youth would hitch a ride from the station back to Main St. if it arrived without passengers. Some put coins on the tracks waiting for approaching engines to flatten them. Others recall "riding the hogs" in the rail stockyard.

The original Athens station burned down in March 1942, along with its warehouse and valuable records. While surrounding mills were spared, there was considerable loss, especially for station master Alec Watt. It was replaced by a smaller structure. In the 1930s there was an "egg grading station" in part

of the waiting room. Farmers brought their eggs in for grading by the station master before shipment to Brockville at 12 cents a dozen. The B&W "Jitney", a railway coach with a built-in diesel engine, was used for local passengers and mail service for a time as well. Due to financial difficulties, the arrival of the automobile and road improvements, the B & W eventually closed in 1952. Railway enthusiast and collector Dr. Doug Wight had the Athens station moved to "Wight's corners" near the corner of Lake Eloida and Hard Island Roads, with the intention of creating a museum. It was later remodelled into a home. Remnants of the old rail bed are still quite evident near the station area or across the front lawn of Maple View Lodge. The B&W is also embedded into local history in a powerful way during what was considered to be The Golden Age of Athens. LH

**Editor's note: To find out more about the early railroads, come to the Athens and Area Heritage Society's presentation, by noted speaker Railway Bob, in the Joshua Bates Centre on March 26th at 2 pm.**