

YOUR PRAIRIE SPACES

story Douglas W. Gillis photos Lori Boesch & Douglas W. Gillis

YOUR TOWN GRAY

How to Build a Railroad (66' or less)







Gray's newly founded Heritage Committee wanted to preserve a short stretch of rail to commemorate the role the train played in the community's settlement and growth. They were undaunted when told the land was unavailable. The determined committee members simply rebuilt the rails smack-dab in the middle of town.

The inspiration to save a piece of the CN rail line near Gray came from local residents who remembered walking the tracks as children. Following the tracks was a wonderful journey of exploration where a special vantage point could be taken from within the vanishing prairies. The journey was most memorable when balancing on the rails and walking into a seemingly endless gleam of

these same rails, toward the crimson sunset. Meadowlarks perched on whistle signs, their sound distinct to this grassy land. Red-winged blackbirds skillfully wove their nests into the cattails just out of easy reach of the curious. Fascinating rocks lined the railbed and some of the best were to fill the small pockets of the young geologists that walked the rails year after year. Or they would skip over the water of the

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Saskatchewan
builds a
monument to the
Prairie past in
Gray.*

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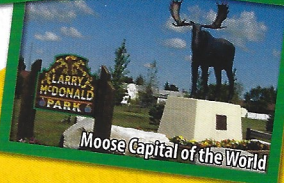
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YOUR TOWN GRAY



spring-filled ditch. The stately hawk or owl sitting motionless on the telephone poles, waited for the unsuspecting. Ducks that nested close to the tracks in the snowberry bushes (*Symphoricarpos occidentalis*) became long-term studies and all amidst the sharp whistle of the trains that ran by with ever-decreasing frequency.

By the mid-1980s, the landscape had changed. The telephone poles disappeared first, the station and its platform, then one by one the elevators and now, finally, the rails. Could this be allowed without an attempt to conserve a piece of this past? As the residents discussed this issue, I found that there were others who felt as I did.

After contact was made with CN and Cando, the cooperating companies in charge of the rail line demolition, and with the local rural municipality, rink board, and hamlet chair, our plan quickly moved to phase one. The local community sprang into action. Using donated time, equipment, and expertise, ballast

(gravel) from the old rail line was put in place, the required number of ties delivered along with 4 sections of rail dated early 20th century, and the necessary hardware to fix it in place. Our 66' of railroad was well underway.

Our small community had co-hosted homecoming events in 1984. In preparation, an old windmill was relocated to a corner lot on Main Street with a plaque to commemorate its history. The windmill project had been spearheaded by John Ford (2008 Saskatchewan Volunteer Medal recipient recognizing outstanding volunteer service or exceptional community involvement) and may have been the stimulus for this rail relocation project. In any case, what became apparent was the keen enthusiasm of area residents to take the utmost pride in their community, and this was one way to realize this devotion.

Surprisingly, or maybe not, the crew assembled had all the knowledge and expertise necessary

for such an undertaking. The visionaries and organizers, the railroaders and surveyors, the plants people and equipment operators were all miraculously available to assist within the space of a week or two; a truly Saskatchewan effort.

What direction to take, and how far to pursue this dream were key issues posed at a community garden design meeting. I had been invited to speak on garden history and landscaping in prior summers, but this time I was able to tie design and conservation together into a more meaningful session. Now that the decision to save a section of the rail had been made, the location chosen and work begun, the agreement of what next had to be made. Did the rail in itself, constitute the project? Or should there be a jigger (handcar) found to sit on it? What about the surrounding area? How did the disciplines of garden history, conservation, and heritage management interact? Should there be a heritage garden created or not?

It was decided that the natural grasses and shrubs from the line should be used at this new location. Scoops of nature were brought bucket by bucket and placed alongside the newly laid line. Original signs were used to adorn its length (the W whistle stop indicator, #94—our mileage marker from the US border) lent authenticity to the scene. A donation of lilac, as old as Gray, was made from another corner of town. Plans were made to take cuttings from the old poplar tree on the corner so that one of the few remaining specimens original to the hamlet could continue on as a piece of living history. Then, perhaps a further step could be taken. The collection of plants from farmsteads in the area, both inhabited and disused, could be assembled into a heritage garden. Immediately, there was an offer of some homestead peonies that had been brought from Ontario in the early 20th century. More offers are sure to follow should the heritage garden



top: Lori Boesch (on ground, left), Brian McFarlin (in loader) and Douglas Gillis build the gravel bed. CANDO rail service supply company volunteered equipment to support the rail-building project. middle: Glen Cleveland and friends Marty and Gordon pause for a picture in front of their jigger car. bottom: Authentic signs from the rails that passed the town of Gray were recovered and used on the reproduction.



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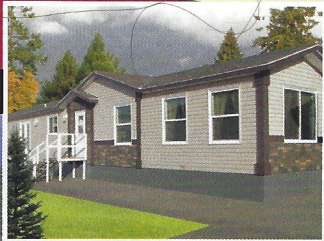
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YOUR PRAIRIE LIVING

idea develop into a reality.

I learned that the spirit of Saskatchewan, and that of Gray specifically, was as strong as I remembered it. Like many others, I had spent my formative years in Gray, but left it behind a quarter of a century ago. The lasting impact of an upbringing in such a setting cannot be ignored, and I can say that I am proud to be from Saskatchewan.

While this rail relocation project may seem insignificant at first glance, its impact should not be underestimated. The railroads were integral to an earlier way of life. Without the rail lines, communities founded by the settlers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries would not have thrived, or even survived. By retaining a piece of this history, we are passing on valuable knowledge to future generations, to touch and experience.

The project was initiated and led by Lori Boesch. She has worked for Hockey Canada and the NHL, returning to live in Gray 10 years ago. The co-conspirator and author, Douglas Gillis, is a garden designer and historian. At present, he resides in Budapest, Hungary, with his wife and 3 sons.



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