



Trains at Pier 21

It's estimated that 95% of the immigrants who passed through Pier 21 boarded a train to continue their journey to central and western Canada. The immigration shed was their first stop, but the trains were responsible for bringing them to their new Canadian homes.

The train station was located in the Annex Building that was connected to Pier 21 by a pedway that exists to this day. Pier 21 also had several sets of rails that drew up directly alongside the immigration shed. The rails are still embedded in the asphalt outside our doors. These were distinct from the train station, and many immigrants were served from this embarkation point rather than the train station proper. This transportation was often independent of regular passenger service.

The "Railway Acts" entitled the CNR and CPR to sponsor immigrants into Canada so both Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railway trains were used for the transportation of immigrants. However, it appears that the Canadian National Railway was the dominant immigrant carrier. Depending upon the destination of the immigrant, at various points throughout their journey they may have required service from other rail companies.

Track 6 at the CNR Halifax train station served the Dominion Atlantic Railway (a CPR subsidiary) for quite some time.

Just as the ships that called at Pier 21 in the late 1920's were vastly different from those in later years, so were the trains with their own distinct characteristics. In *The Pier 21 Story* J.P. LeBlanc describes the early immigrant trains.

“The immigrant trains on tracks adjacent to the Southend station in the 1920's, were called colonist trains and were primitive in nature. Coal burning stoves at each end of the cars provided heat, and the dining facilities left much to be desired.”

Many immigrants, military service personnel, displaced people, war brides and British evacuee children clearly remember their experience on board the train. Elsa Taurens was a Latvian refugee when she arrived at Pier 21 in January of 1949 and boarded the train:

“My strongest memory of the train ride is looking out into the night, seeing nothing but snow covered fields, with small groups of houses here and there, brightly lit and inviting through the darkness. As we passed through small towns or over level crossings, the locomotive whistled. The sound was mournful and scary, but at the same time exciting. Even now, whenever I hear a train whistle, I am instantly reminded of my first glimpses of Canada.”



In this excerpt from the diary that he kept of his journey Peter Hessel describes his experience:

“Our train left at 6 p.m. Two other trains were to take the rest of the people who were left behind. They waved. We went through Nova Scotia, and it was still daylight for several hours. The countryside is beautiful and romantic-looking,

with rugged rocks, clear lakes, huge forests, and brightly clean settlements. As soon as the sunset, it became dark very suddenly. We pulled out the seats and went to sleep. - This morning we passed a long lake surrounded by wooded mountains.”

Mr. Hessel’s diary paints a romantic picture of travel on the immigrant trains but many individuals recall long, uncomfortable journeys. Dutch immigrant, Th. J. Duiverman never forgot his train trip:

“Outside Pier 21 we had to walk over cinders and railroad tracks to get to our train. The train trip was pretty rough. Just wooden benches, no sleeping cars and no food. If you had not bought food before you left Halifax, you were out of luck. The train had a steam engine and everyone was dirty and gritty by the time they reached their destination. The lights on the train were gas and one of the lights in my car was leaking, so it was turned off leaving us in the dark at night.”

His countrymen W.A.T. Van den Byllaardt seems to have experienced both the romance and the annoyances of train travel during the Pier 21 era:

“We left for Edmonton, Alberta with the "Super Continental". The train had benches comfortable enough to get some sleep and the service was good on board. The meals were high priced but we managed to pick up what we needed on the way. The landscape changed as the days passed on, when we entered those endless prairies, it sure made us feel very small.”

For Italian immigrant Serverino Andolfatto the experience was much the same but he made the best of it:

“The coach of the train from Halifax to Montreal had wooden benches and was very cold, but I did not care. I was seated with the new friends I had made on the ship and we all were fascinated by the new land, the ever changing beautiful landscape going by outside the train windows.”

What follows is the most memorable quote about train travel from Pier 21’s entire story collection. William Kreeft writes:

“The train ride to Alberta took us across most of Canada. The trains were dirty and very short on all of the amenities for daily life. When I entered Grade 1, the class was asked to draw a picture of a train. I did so and coloured the whole train black. The teacher spanked me for not using other colours, and for not taking a realistic view of trains. My mother later explained to her what my experiences of trains had been.”

When Pier 21 alumni and their descendents visit Pier 21 today they are reminded of their train trips by the rail car that the Canadian National Railway donated to the museum. Sitting just to the left of our front doors the 1937 railway car takes visitors back in time

though many point out the modern seats which the car now houses are a far cry from the hard benches that they remember.

Here is the history of the car that the Canadian National Railway donated that is stationed outside of Pier 21's main entrance:

CN 40109

Canadian Car and Foundry in Montreal, Quebec, built CN 40109 in 1937. Originally numbered 5227 while in passenger service at CN, it was one of a new series of coaches built between 1937 and 1939 to upgrade CN's aging passenger fleet.

CN 5227 was state of the art railway passenger equipment in 1937. It features all-steel construction – a first – replacing the heavier steel and wood paneling common in earlier passenger coaches. The windows are sealed, allowing the car to be air conditioned, also a first for its time.

CN 5227 was retired from active passenger service in 1983 and re-numbered 401909 when it became part of CN's fleet of railcars used to transport and service work gangs in Alberta. It has not been used in active service since 1991.

The Alberta Railway Museum near Edmonton, Alberta restored CN 40901 using CN colours and the company's logo from the 1930's.

