Synopsis

Mail by Rail on Both Sides of the Manitoba/USA Border

The availability of rail transport for the mails in western Canada evolved from the development of rail lines between Winnipeg (Selkirk) and the States of Minnesota and North Dakota. This preceded the availability of the CPR for mail transportation to eastern Canada.

THIS IS NOT INTENDED TO BE AN EXHIBIT OF CROSS BORDER EXAMPLES. The intent of this exhibit is to describe the RPO runs that extended to the border of Manitoba within Manitoba, Minnesota and North Dakota, and which are inexorably linked to the postal history of Manitoba. Half of the examples are Canadian and half are American, but all illustrate the services that enables a revolution to mail handling in western Canada.

The first rail line that carried mail into Manitoba was built by the government in Manitoba to join with the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway line that had been constructed northward to St. Vincent and Noyes, Minnesota. The Manitoba "border" point was Emerson. For a short time, this was the only rail carrier of mail in western Canada.

A Canadian, Donald Smith (later, Lord Strathcona), was deeply involved in the ownership of the lines on both sides of the border. He was involved with the development of the CPR and he was also part owner (with the legendary Jim Hill) of the SPM&M Railway.

Although the first mail was moved by baggage car (an example is provided), the volume soon justified the use of railway post office cars that used their own post marks. The first of these, ST. VINCENT & WINNIPEG / P.C., was the first RPO used in Western Canada.

This exhibit is NOT about trans-boundary mail, but about RPOs used both in Canada and the United States on lines that moved between Manitoba and North Dakota and Minnesota. Some lines did not carry railway post office cars, although one – the Brandon, Saskatchewan and Hudson's Bay Railway – had a 30-year contract to carry Canadian mail. An example is provided.

Maps taken from period railway timetables are included to show the relative locations of border towns that were included in RPO designations. Warroad is included because the Canadian Northern Railway line between Winnipeg and Ft. Frances, Ontario passed through Minnesota. Maps of all lines are included, as they are necessary to illustrate the geo-history of this topic.

The railways in chronological order include:

- ❖ St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway (Great Northern Railway)
- ❖ The Pembina Line (now Canadian Pacific Railway)
- ❖ Canadian Pacific Railway
- ❖ Northern Pacific Railway

- ❖ Canadian Northern Railway
- ❖ Minneapolis, St. Paul and Sault Ste Marie Railway (SOO)
- ❖ Brandon, Saskatchewan and Hudson's Bay Railway (Great Northern)

The three main companies on the USA side were the Great Northern, the SOO Line (which became part of the CPR system) and the Northern Pacific. On the Canadian side, the two main systems were the Canadian Pacific and the Canadian Northern (which became part of the Canadian National Railway system).

The exhibit is presented in a combined chronological/geographical format:

1. Pre-1881
2. The underlined RPO postmarks (1881-1907)
3. 1908-1965

All Canadian RPOs but not all Canadian hammer numbers are presented, as these are too numerous and unnecessary for the purposes of the exhibit. None of the US.RPOs in this area had hammer numbers. There is a very complex variety of US RPOs used on the runs described and representative examples are included for those runs.

The exhibit concludes with the published example (Harrison) illustrating usage of both Canadian and US RPOs on the Winnipeg-Warroad-Ft. Frances-Duluth run.

The exhibit was awarded medals, as follows:

- Royal 2005, London, Ontario (silver)
- BNAPEX 2005, Edmonton, Alberta (silver-bronze)
- CALTAPEX, Calgary, Alberta (vermeil)

The author is indebted to fellow-collectors in both countries for generous advice. Some personal research is demonstrated in the exhibit and where questions remain open, this is mentioned.

Robert K. Lane
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