

# Canadians shouldn't lose track of railway history

*Margaret Bird - October 2025*

The majority of immigrants who worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway, particularly in British Columbia, were from China. Between 1881 and 1885, over 17,000 Chinese labourers came to Canada to work on the railway, forming a significant portion of the workforce, especially in the challenging mountain sections. The majority of the workers arrived directly from Southern China.

It's estimated that for every mile of railroad track laid in Canada, three Chinese workers died, according to a statement by Mable Elmore, British Columbia's parliamentary secretary for anti-racism initiatives. Up to 6,000 workers died while working in Canada and never saw their families again. "During construction, Chinese railroad workers were given the most difficult, dangerous tasks," she said. "While white workers were paid \$1.50 to \$2.50 per day with their provisions provided, Chinese workers were paid only \$1 a day and had to pay for their own gear and food."

That mistreatment of Chinese Canadians continued throughout the turn of the century. On July 1, 1923, pressured by the BC government, the federal government enacted the Chinese Immigration Act (often referred to as the Chinese exclusion act), which barred nearly all people of Chinese descent from entering the country. The act was in place for 24 years. It left many people separated from their families; some were never reunited. In 2006, the Government of Canada apologized for the injustices caused by the act.

The Canadian Pacific Railway project was often referred to as the 'National Dream', particularly during its construction. This term (coined during the late 19th Century) highlighted its significance as a symbol of national unity and Confederation, and emphasized the project's role in connecting British Columbia to the rest of Canada and solidifying the nation. And, in doing so, up to 6,000 lives were lost. In contrast, during World War I, there were over 9 million military deaths, according to 'Our World in Data', and, in World War II, military deaths are estimated to be over 21 million. In both scenarios, all those precious lives were lost connecting a nation and its people, and fighting for our freedoms and peace. Such huge sacrifices they all made and yet, today, those incredible humanitarian actions are seemingly being forgotten on some levels – we still have wars in parts of the world, and the efforts to 'connect a nation' are seemingly being forgotten as we see many train lines no longer being used.

While it was a massive infrastructure project, it wasn't solely called a capital project, although it certainly involved significant capital investment. The project was a key component of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's National Policy.

In modern terminology, the Canadian Pacific Railway project would undoubtedly be classified as a capital project due to its large-scale infrastructure development and long-term investment.

While the government played a crucial role in funding and facilitating the project, and according to 'Peace Brigades International-Canada', the Canadian Pacific Railway itself was a private corporation. The project was also referred to in the context of the 'Pacific Scandal' - a political controversy related to the awarding of the railway contract. (Some things never change, it would seem.)

If trains were to suddenly disappear, it would cause major disruptions to global economies and transportation systems, especially for bulk commodities like coal, grain, and other raw materials. Freight and passenger transportation would be severely impacted, leading to potential shortages of goods, increased road congestion and fuel consumption, and economic downturns, especially in regions heavily reliant on rail transport. Subways and other urban rail systems would also cease to function, causing significant disruptions to daily commutes and urban life.

Many cities and regions rely on trains for passenger transportation, including subways, commuter trains, and long-distance passenger lines. Losing tracks altogether would disrupt daily commutes, travel plans, and potentially lead to a decline in economic activity in affected areas.

Trains also play a crucial role in transporting coal and other fuels to power plants. The disappearance of trains, particularly electric trains, could lead to power outages and further economic disruption by reducing a power source, or potentially triggering cascading failures within the grid.

Existing train tracks and infrastructure would become obsolete, potentially requiring significant investment in alternative transportation solutions. Rail travel often connects communities, especially in remote areas. The loss of rail services could isolate these communities and impact their access to essential services and opportunities. And, any alternative means of travel could be cost prohibitive to many people.

A considerable number of branch lines and secondary routes have already been abandoned over the years, particularly in the latter half of the 20th Century. Railways built to serve specific mines or industrial sites are often abandoned when those operations cease, and changes in commodity transport, the rise of trucking, and increased operating costs have also led to the abandonment of many lines.

On a more positive note – for the railroads, that is - travelling by road and air has become so expensive today that trains are becoming competitive again. And, if world peace and travelling by train could both be reignited, in honour of all those who paid the ultimate price for the fight, wouldn't it be absolutely wonderful?