

P R E F A C E



Bill Brownridge, artist and author, is a man with a mission. Raised in a station agent's house on the Canadian prairies, Bill spent his formative years in an environment of change. Change, as his father got 'bumped' when rail transportation declined; change, as his family, along with all prairie residents, became the victims of the three D's: Depression, Drought, and Defoliation. Change also, when passenger trains travelled empty while hordes of itinerant unemployed crowded the freight trains in an eternal search for jobs.

Farmers and their families experienced major change as well when they left behind their now desolate quarter-section and mortgages. They packed their slender resources in what became known as "The Bennett Buggies"—a Ford car or truck pulled by a team of horses because money for gasoline was virtually non-existent.

The fourth D—the Diesel engine—was to come a few years later, displacing steam almost overnight.

Despite this depression picture, Bill Brownridge recalls with nostalgia the era when transcontinental trains would chug to a standstill at every way station en route east or west. There they would be met by the entire community. The mail clerk would throw off the sacks of mail and sundry packages, and the conductor helped the occasional

passenger to embark or disembark. A few moments later the conductor would signal forward with his flag, the engineer giving short toots as the train gathered speed heading for the next stop 20 miles down the line. The anonymous hosts on the station platform would exchange silent messages of Godspeed to the anonymous passengers peering through the windows, who reciprocated in kind.

Today, the silvered train, drawn by diesel engines, speeds through a somewhat ordered wilderness of grain, cattle spreads, Indian reserves, and the occasional wooded area, by-passing the few remaining farm communities. It attempts in vain to race the 747 jet flying overhead and the somewhat slower Greyhound bus on the parallel hard-top to the next concrete jungle a couple of hundred miles away. There it will be greeted by an over-sized billboard saying "Welcome to the Hospitality City of the West."

This, in part, is the essence of the book Bill Brownridge has created. Beyond the nostalgia is the serious purpose of presenting a historical document of early railroading in Western Canada. In conversation Bill points to the fact that, while pioneer rolling stock of the colonial days is preserved for scholarly study and entertainment in our museums, the

structures-agents, section hands, roundhouses, icehouses, sheds, coal docks, and the occasional railway hotel are rapidly disappearing. In "Tracking the Iron Horse," Bill Brownridge has created a significant historical document which should find its niche in museums and archives from coast to coast.

Bill also adds his own personal statement both in his philosophical approach to a visual presentation, along with his written commentary, as he takes us on his Voyage of Rediscovery. He includes not only buildings, but also the portraits of pensioned railroaders who regaled him with reminiscences while posing for him.

The original collection of approximately seventy-five paintings and graphics, at the time of publication, toured Canadian museums and art galleries on a circuit beginning and continuing through 1981. The collection had its premiere showing at the National Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa from October 1977 to March 1978, complementing its permanent display of pioneer rolling stock.

The paintings were created in the summer of 1975 and a number of the buildings have already been moved or destroyed. Hopefully, the collection will be sold as a group of paintings with the intention of serving as a visual record of an all-important era in Western Canadian history.

(ARCHIE F. KEY CM., DUC., FCMA.)