

I hear you can't get up close to a construction site these days. Danger's everywhere I guess. Back in 1906 it was different. I'll take you there, to a site I lived in for a couple months. We were building a train crossing from Bunclody to Beverly – across the Souris. It literally took my breath away.



Bridge construction

Harvest was done so my uncle picked me up for what he called a work adventure. He had his best team and the cart stacked high with hay. We left Wakopa and made our way along the construction trail that was becoming the Great Northern Railway. The trail took us through Boissevain and up to Minto.

I took care of the tent, and the horses when they weren't working. Uncle hooked to a company scraper. He said it wasn't interesting but I could come find him later. He was right. The scraping and hauling got old real quick. But the coordination of men, horses and equipment was fascinating. There were two dozen teams in the mile Uncle was building. The men hardly talked. It was all business earning the 50 cents per hour. The horses could only work 8 hours, though, so at least there was rest and chatter later.

About the third day Uncle went north to the Souris River where they needed another team to build the bridge ramp. I'd seen bridges over creeks. But nothing prepared me for this one. Apparently a train can only go uphill 3 feet for every 100 feet of track. So instead of adding miles of track up and down the sides of the

Souris Valley, they built a bridge. It looked ridiculous. A match stick tower to hold up a massive weight on wheels. Utterly scary to think I might soon cross that thing in a long, heavy train.

Uncle explained that a couple wealthy families, the Hills from Ontario and McCabes from the Dakotas, cooked up a plan to move grain from our farms, wood from Turtle Mountain, mail from everywhere and coal from who knows where to Minneapolis and to Hudson's Bay. Almost all trains, he said, went east and west, but this one was going north and south, making a ton of new connections and hopefully opening markets for us and our neighbours. During those months with Uncle, I got up close and personal with that bridge. Totally impressive, how it was bolted together in triangles and each part reinforced the parts around it. Made sense to my farm boy brain. Bit by bit, projects big or small, we have a way of figuring them out.

Well, it may have been a good plan, but with cars, trucks and straight roads just around the corner there wasn't much need for a slow, shaky train. It lives on in our family stories though. The fellow who drove the train for its entire 30 year life, between St John's North Dakota and Brandon, was Charlie. To us, it was Charlie's train. When we needed to sell our milk in town, we'd flag him down. I miss that train. Until, that is, I recall balancing on that spindly trestle bridge over top the Souris. Sheesh!

The Bridge of Bunclody was adapted from a story written for Vantage Points 1.

See ya' later!

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