

For anyone to make their way to Youngstown, along what is now known as River Road, is to experience what surely is nothing less than the wonder of Mother Nature. Whether the trip is made by car, motorcycle, bike, boat or walking the closeness of the Niagara River, the view of the gorge it has cut out over the millenniums and the nearness to our friendly neighbors in Canada offer a unique welcome to the Village I call Home.

Many years have passed as the Niagara River has flowed this route, carving out the gorge from “The” Niagara Falls to Lake Ontario, passing between what eventually became the United States and Canada.

This article will look into the means of travel along this route as our community began to be settled and its identity established.

Prior to 1852 travel between Lewiston and Youngstown, including transport of the continually expanding fruit products, was by stage coach, horse drawn wagons & carriages, horse back and by foot on dirt roads. In 1837 the 1st Railroad in Niagara County was finished, a single car connecting Lockport and Niagara Falls. Known as the “Strap Railroad” it ran on iron straps nailed to wooden beams. Between 1852 and 1892 three attempts were made to establish a line to Youngstown along today’s River Road. All these attempts failed. The need to construct a dependable railroad between Lewiston and Youngstown continued to be an issue, driven primarily by the concerns of the more efficient and rapid transport of fruit, freight and passengers.

In September 1895 a group of local landowners and investors from Buffalo filed a certificate of incorporation for the Lewiston Youngstown Frontier Railway Company (LYFR). Laurence D. Rumsey, who owned property north of where Stella Niagara stands, was named President of the Group and was the prime mover in the planning and construction. Initial funding for the project, totaling \$60,000 was raised by selling shares of stock priced at \$100 each.

The construction began in April 1896. The line started at the docks on Water Street in Lewiston, ran east on Center Street to 5th Street, then north to the Lewiston Village limits, then thru private land to 3rd and Church Streets in Youngstown. At this point the line ran west to Main Street, north to the Youngstown Village limits, then east and north along what is now Jackson Street and Lake Road to it’s end on the shore of Lake Ontario.

The Line, which ran for 7 ¼ miles was powered by electricity supplied by the Niagara Falls Hydraulic Power Plant. Before the LYFR the trip between Youngstown and Lewiston took 2 ½ to 3 hours. The LYFR traveled at 20 mph and took about 20 minutes directly, longer depending on the number of stops. By the Fall of 1897 the LYFR was already carrying large numbers of passengers and freight to and from Youngstown. The LYFR consisted of four 8 bench open motor cars and two closed combination baggage and passenger cars seating 16 people. The total cost of roadway, equipment, transmission line, land damages etc. amounted to nearly \$100,000.

As mentioned above Laurence Rumsey was the prime mover in the planning, construction and day to day operation of the LYFR. On the land north of Stella Niagara, which he had purchased in 1886, Rumsey built a summer home which he named Wawanaud. There was a scheduled stop at Stella Niagara, Wawanaud, and at nearly every farm along the rail route. At each there were small platforms close to the tracks for loading/unloading passengers and freight. In 1887 Rumsey had purchased 20 acres of the shore of Lake Ontario abutting Old Fort Niagara to the west and named the land Rumsey Park; and it became the northern most point of the LYFR. At this time there was an active military facility at Fort Niagara and a 1000-foot spur was run into the barracks area accommodating both passengers and freight.

An early brochure described the trolley “as a new and picturesque line of travel through the rich fruit lands of the lower Niagara in and about the quaint old Village of Youngstown. Here the Niagara River affords the bet bass, perch, and pike fishing to be found from Duluth to the Gulf of the St. Lawrence.”

From 1901 the LYFR was referred to the as “The Old Fort Route” and some cars bore that name. The ticket office was located at Haskell Hardware, at the corner of Main & Water Streets in Youngstown (today the 409 Main Street Apartment Building). The cars ran every 25 to 40 minutes in the spring and summer, with a more limited schedule in the fall and winter. A familiar village resident, George Robinson was the ticket agent for many years. The conductors and the motormen made an average of \$1.65 for a 12-hour workday. In 1909, the only year for which such data remains, the LYFR had earnings of \$5800 from passenger fares and just over \$4000 from freight.

As mentioned above, Laurence Rumsey had purchased 20 acres on the shore of Lake Ontario, naming it Rumsey Park that was the northern terminus of the LYFR. At the time trolley companies across the country built parks at the end of their lines. These parks were a marketing strategy to encourage passengers to ride the railways. They were often located by recreational areas, where the visitors could swim, go on boat rides, enjoy picnic facilities, carnival rides and live entertainment. By around 1919, after World War I, these “Trolley Parks” accounted for the majority of around 1,000 amusement parks across the country.

Rumsey Park, was expanded to 30 acres around the turn of the century, with improvements being made each year thru the 1920’s, and became a family friendly destination. The attractions included cottage rental, prices at \$1.00/day or \$8.00/week with electric lights and running water, a large band pavilion, 4 lunch halls and a kitchen to accommodate parties, a merry go round, swings and bathing houses. Rumsey sold the Trolley Park in 1928, but it continued in operation as Fort Niagara Beach for many years.

The Lewiston Youngstown Frontier Railway and Rumsey Park were valuable resources in the growth of the community of Youngstown. In addition to affording a comfortable experience to enjoy the beauty of the Lower Niagara Region, its destination provided opportunities to visit historical sites and a variety of recreational activities.

By the mid 1920’s the increasing use of automobiles, trucks and buses on ever improving and new built roads dramatically impacted the operation of the railroad. Passenger services declined, and was ultimately discontinued. The tracks from the barracks and the lake side sites were removed, along with those on Main Street up to the Cold Storage by the mid 1930’s. The remaining rail line continued to be utilized to transport freight, especially fruits from the Youngstown Cold storage until 1950.

At this point all services were discontinued, and the LYFR rolled into history. Property on the right of way was sold, or returned to property owners. The right of way from Youngstown to Lewiston beginning on the east side of the Cold Storage site could be identified by a line of electric power poles and soon will be developed into a walking/bike path.

Sources

Town Of Porter Historical Museum

Wikipedia