



► Streetcar 2894 has been used in *Murdoch Mysteries*. The railway museum is often used for filming and can even be rented for private photo shoots.



GONNA TAKE A
HISTORICAL JOURNEY:
Halton County

*Radial Railway
Museum*

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Each morning at the Halton County Radial Railway museum, volunteer train operators line up cars on the track, and water flower gardens around their historic train station, while summer students open the shop and snack bar. Staff are preparing for visitors of all ages, who will enjoy unlimited rides on genuine, vintage trains.



▲ Vintage trains take passengers on a short track through forest.

RIDING THE RAILS through the unspoiled forest of the museum property near Milton takes passengers back to a time when cash fare was 10 cents for adults and three cents for children who were “not in arms.”

Life was slower-paced in the early 1900s, but train travel was a model of efficiency. You could get a streetcar from Toronto to Guelph, and travel between most southern Ontario communities, like Stratford and Port Dover, which had fully operational transit systems.

From May to October, visitors at the train museum are taken on a historical journey by a team of highly

skilled volunteers, who love trains and their history. The ride starts at what was originally the Grand Trunk Rockwood station of 1912, which was transported to the museum on a float.

From this station, passengers might catch the No. 327, an open-air train with comfortable wooden benches and iron arm rests. While these seem only fit for summer travel, in their original use, the car would have been taken to a garage, where it would

be lifted from the truck, or wheels, and replaced by a much warmer, closed-in car. However, this summer car is perfect for the museum’s open season.

Take the Trains

These trains and streetcars are meticulously restored by the volunteers. Their attention to detail is seen in the richness of finely crafted tongue-and-groove wood paneling, and intricate trim. Riding them almost feels like the original

commuters are still there with you. But there are no ghost trains here, except maybe at Halloween, or Christmastime, when the museum opens off-season for the special events.

During late spring and summer though, operators like Harold Jones, a conductor who has been volunteering at the museum for 15 years, shuttle patrons along a scenic track that loops to a flower garden, and a train car café, where passengers can disembark for a leisurely stroll, get some



▲ People enjoy riding No. 327, an open-air train perfect for summer use. A conductor operates the train at the front while a motorman stands at the rear.

◀ Rides begin at the 1912 Grand Trunk Rockwood station which was moved to the railway museum. Bill Thompson, left, watches the volunteers at work.

ice cream, or have a picnic at one the tables nestled along an inviting footpath.

No rush to catch the next train, as one will be along every 15 minutes to take riders back to the main station.

The dedicated train buffs, who skillfully restore the rolling stock, also ensure their methods of operation. Driving a train is not a responsibility taken lightly by museum operators, especially with lots of children running to and fro, so staff volunteers



◀ Volunteers Harold Jones on the train, with John Bellsmith.

▶ The end of the line lets you refresh yourself with ice cream, chips, pop and water inside the car that's been converted to a snack bar.

are given careful course training, earning an operator's licence and a point system to maintain high standards.

Each train is operated by a conductor who is in charge at the front of the train, and a motorman who stands at the rear. They depend on bell signals to indicate when to stop and start, just as a century ago.

Movies and television shows that are set in a historic time period often use museum cars. Streetcar 2894, which bears the banner "Oakwood - St. Clair," has been used in *Murdoch Mysteries* episodes. In CBC's current *Anne* series, the museum's train station and one of the train cars can be seen, which was also used in previous versions of *Anne of Green Gables*. Movies showing museum property also include *Cinderella Man* and Ron Howard's film *The Boxer*.

Continued on page 40 ▶





What Else to Do

Visitors can also explore the large storage barn near the station, to see antique trains that are fully restored, but are no longer in operation due to their age. Visitors are encouraged to come aboard for a close look at the exquisite detail and craftsmanship of bygone eras.

To add to the experience, volunteers have set up small store fronts, as a sample of what passengers would

have seen through a train window pulling into a town: a train shop, ticket booth, freight office, hardware store, and a barber shop.

To add more fun to the childrens' visits, volunteer staff provide a scavenger hunt, hiding rubber ducks in different spots on the trains around the museum.

Staff volunteers try and make learning fun at the museum. "You have to know where you've been to know

where you're going," says volunteer conductor Harold Jones. "Sometimes what used to work still does, but if we don't know what's been tried already, mistakes can be repeated. We learn from our past, so we don't have to learn all over again."

How It Happened

Belief in the value of keeping history alive is how Halton County Radial Railway began during a discussion among

five young men at a New Year's Eve party in 1953.

Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) streetcars were about to be scrapped, and these men wanted to preserve them, but the TTC didn't have the space, and wouldn't allow the small group to buy any of the cars. So, according to avid history buff and 25-year museum volunteer, Bill Thompson, the men notified several newspapers that the TTC wasn't allowing them

Continued on page 42 ▶



◀ An office in Rockwood station, set up as it might have been in the past.

▼ Visitors enjoy riding vintage trains through the forest, although it seems that cell phones must still be monitored.





◀ This Toronto car, built in 1915 for the Landsdowne North Line of the Civil Railways, a city-owned predecessor of the TTC, stays safely in the barn, but visitors are encouraged to look inside.

to save any of the cars. The story made the front page of a newspaper and there was a public outcry. As a result, the small group got their first car.

Then they met the challenge of finding the museum land, which already happened to have two km of track. Next, they got the right of way on the tracks for an electric rail.

Member Owned

It's always been a volunteer operation. Thompson explains that the museum is member owned and operated, with no government funding. They only receive grants for building and restoring, and their mandate is to "inform, educate and inspire the public," says Thompson.

Families, groups of friends, school groups who all enjoy a ride back in time on an authentic antique rail car,

benefit from this mandate.

Mark McDermott, a retired clergyman, volunteers at the museum once a week. "The museum is family centred," he says. "It's a great place for parents, grandparents, and their children, including those with special needs. It's a safe place. Parties, picnics, and even weddings happen here."

For more information, see hcry.org or call 519.856.9802. **NEV**

Patricia Post is a freelance journalist specializing in personal and community histories. She previously wrote "Industry to Forest: Kilns of Limehouse," Niagara Escarpment Views, Summer 2014. Her work is also on postwrites.com.



▲ Operator Garry Radden shows Jaime Miszczak of Guelph, the basics of hand-operated train driving.



▲ This family was celebrating Gary Brinwich's 70th birthday last year at the railway museum, with relatives from New Brunswick. Gary is in the black and white striped shirt.