

"What would you do if the trains were still running?"

I live in Paradise, in the Valley. Like many of my neighbours, it has been my home for as long as I remember. My parents and their parents lived here before us.

But Paradise isn't Paradise any more. We have all terrain vehicles roaring through our yards now. When we object to them, we are often asked, "Well, what would you do if the trains were still running?"

Trains, the thinking goes, would surely have bothered us back then, even more than ATV's do now.

Let me tell you why these people are wrong. Let me tell you our story, and the story of the trains of Paradise.

Let's start with Charlotte.

She was elegant. Married to MLA Avard Longley, she was queen. She found the village name too folksy, and even tried to persuade the people of Paradise to do away it. But no one would have it. It had been "Paradise" since 1694, when the Acadians knew it as "Paradis Terrestre"- "Paradise on Earth". And so it remains.

On July 20, 1867, Charlotte Longley stood here with her husband, the new Commissioner of Railways for Nova Scotia. Shovel in hand, she had her royal moment. 400 souls had gathered to see her turn the very first sod in Annapolis County for the new railway. The papers said that Charlotte was "graceful and becoming" as she lifted her shovel.

The railway made Paradise proud. The steam locomotive and passenger cars were magenta-coloured with gold lettering, and decorated with a crest depicting Evangeline in "The Land of Evangeline". The train swept past beautiful vistas of our river, the picturesque homes of Paradise, and oceans of apple blossoms in May.

The rumbling of the trains shook the closest homes two to three times a day, but people waited for it. They knew it was friendly; it meant the job was being done.

The chugging of the locomotive trying to climb our steep grade in the snow meant "Come and help dig." A few short sharp blasts meant cattle on the track. The railway built fencing for farmers, and if cows did escape, the railway helped.

Best of all, the haunting low whistle of the train as it crossed the Leonard Road meant to a child in a warm bed, "Ride with me in your dreams."

The station was a hive. The train took away thousands of barrels of Paradise apples that were packed in the warehouses beside the tracks, and tons of milled lumber from Roxbury. Countless giant milk cans from the farmers of Clarence went to the city. As farm produce went out, all kinds of goods came in: everything from fine china to furnaces.

For 120 years, the people of Paradise rode the train: university students, families, salespeople, tourists. Once we even had an ex-Nazi, Otto Strasser, in Paradise. He made secret train trips, trying through his contacts in Germany and Canada to bring Hitler down. (He didn't, but he did become an importer of Nova Scotia lobster in post-war Germany!)

The last "Dayliner" run in 1990 was a sad one. But when they tore up the tracks, there was a new gift: the wonder of a quiet walk on the rail beds, which were still in very good shape. We collected stray iron spikes as souvenirs. The old rail bed was a neighbourly place beside our homes, safely off the highway. We could walk and cycle and be healthy.

We still miss the trains in Paradise. Their sounds were routine, calming, constructive.

They served our common good.

They were so civilized, so useful, so respectful.

They were everything an ATV highway is not.