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The Montreal & Southern Countries Railway Company (1909 – 1956)

by J.R. Thomas Grumley

J.R. Thomas Grumley, the youngest son of a career CNR employee, was born and educated in Montreal. Riding on streetcars to/from school in downtown Montreal and riding in the cabs of Central Vermont and CNR first generation diesel locomotives ensured that an avid interest in streetcars and trains was acquired at an early age. Now semi-retired from a career in Telecommunications, he resides in Manotick, Ontario (near Ottawa). Tom has written seven books and numerous articles on street and interurban railway systems in Quebec, one of which won the 2006 Canadian Railroad Historical Association (CRHA) Book of the Year award. As a life long rail fan, Tom, over the years, had many of his photos published in major North American railway magazines. Tom is a member of the CRHA, The Bytown Railway Society, The C. Robert Craig Memorial Library in Ottawa and the Ottawa Valley Associated Railroaders.

Despite the fact that work on the construction of the M&SC commenced in 1908, the St. Lambert taxpayers, on January 21, 1909 voted in favor of a new bylaw granting the M&SC a franchise to operate an electric passenger and freight service between Montreal and St. Lambert. The company was incorporated as far back as 1897. But it took more than twelve years for the dream of an electric service between Montreal and the southern counties to come to fruition.

On a warm Saturday afternoon on October 30, 1909, cars 1 and 2 carrying invited guests traveled between Montreal and St. Lambert to mark the official inauguration of service between the two communities. Speeches by the Mayor of St. Lambert and the President of the M&SC were followed by a reception at the Brooklyn Park clubhouse. The entourage returned to Montreal at 5 pm that afternoon, crossing the more than 6,000-foot long Victoria Bridge in three minutes. Thus began a hot and cold love affair with interurban operations that would last 47 years.

In 1910, the company would extend its reach to Longueuil to a point just east of the present day Jacques Cartier Bridge. On Saturday, May 28, 1910 a three-car train carrying special guests departed at 2:30 pm from the McGill St. terminal and proceeded to Longueuil. Led by Bandmaster Timon, music by the town band greeted the visitors as they took their position on the platform, erected for the occasion in the municipal park at the corner of Chambly Road and Guillaume St. Mayor Geoffrion extended the best wishes of the town. Other speeches followed and refreshments were then served, after which the party returned to Montreal.

Further expansion to Ranelagh occurred in 1911. In 1912, service would be extended to Greenfield Park, Mackayville and M&SC Junction. It would be followed by Chambly, Richelieu and Marieville in 1913. In late 1915, service reached Abbotsford and finally Granby in 1916, a distance of 47 miles from Montreal. It would take another ten years before the final expansion took place in January 1926, from Marieville to Ste. Angele.

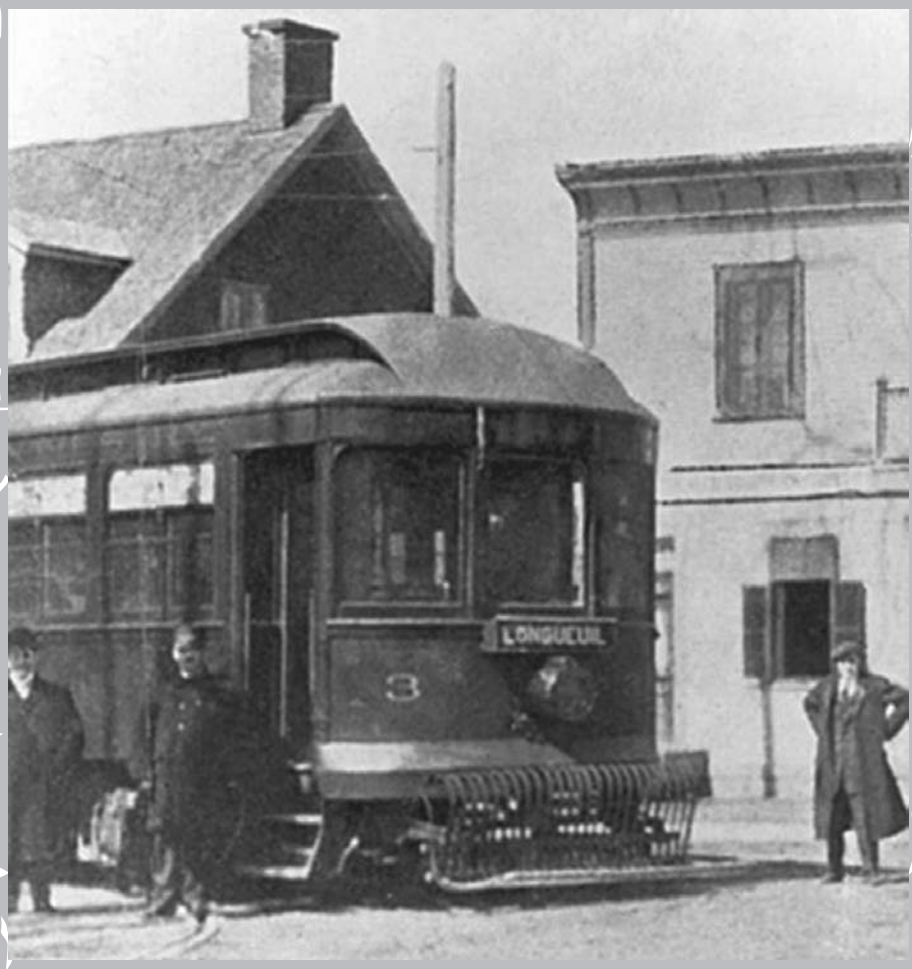
At the initial inauguration of the line in 1909, it was announced that a station and car barn would be built in St. Lambert, thus making St. Lambert the focal point of operations. The station and a three-track brick structure accommodating nine 50-foot cars were completed in mid-1910. But with the aforementioned expansion it soon became necessary to enlarge operations at St. Lambert. As such, a new four-track section to the original car barn was built in 1912. In addition, the new building included general offices, dispatcher's headquarters, locker rooms for the crews and a store house. In 1924 final expansion of this site took place with the opening of the company's new office building, replacing the headquarters site on McGill Street.

The company's initial order of equipment (cars #1-#8) came from the Ottawa Car Company as single end passenger motors. The vast majority of passenger

equipment was ordered from the Ottawa Car Company with other orders from the Grand Trunk, National Car, Osgoode-Bradley, and the Brill Company. To serve the company's suburban operation to St. Lambert and surrounding areas as well as its interurban operation to Granby, the company had 56 passengers' cars. To complement this, the company at one time or another also had 29 work cars comprising plows and sweepers to combat the harsh winters, locomotives and express motor and trailer cars to facilitate its successful freight operation, including three cabooses.

Although the M&SC reached its zenith in January 1926, the beginning of the end was about to take place, albeit in small steps. That year, service around the Longueuil loop was discontinued. With the official opening of the Jacques Cartier Bridge in 1930, service was further cut back in 1932 to Ste. Helene St. in Montreal South where a loop was installed to turn the cars. The advent of the Second World War provided the M&SC with the impetus to continue operating for a few more years, despite the fact that the company had been a money losing operation all through the thirties. As a result, it wouldn't be until 1951 that further cutbacks in service occurred.

With the acquisition of three new diesel locomotives in late 1951, electric service to Granby ceased on Saturday, November 24, 1951 and was replaced by diesel service the following Monday. For that purpose, four coaches and two baggage cars had been completely refurbished as commuter cars.

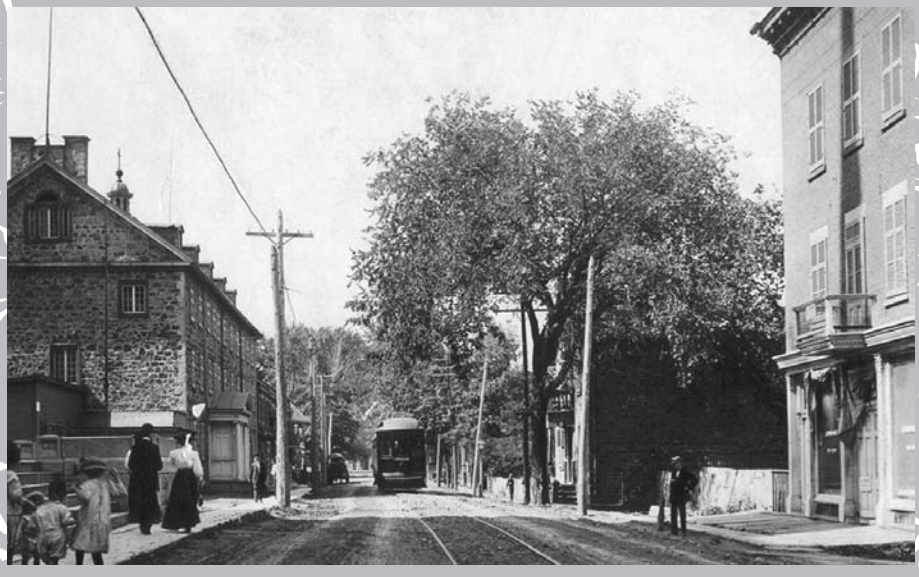


Corner of rue Guillaume and chemin Chambly.
(Source : Société historique et culturelle du Marigot #2073)

The next major cutback occurred on the evening of Saturday, June 18, 1955 when the link to the island of Montreal was severed forever. On that fateful evening, Car #326 built by the Brill Co. in 1917 for the Washington-Virginia Railway was being readied. Train #826 to Brookline completed its run; then trains #438 and #442 and others made their final routes. It was near midnight and the rail fans who arrived for this final run were getting restless and anxious. In the early morning hours of Sunday, June 19, 1955 the light in the McGill St. station was turned off for good. Car #326 with its full compliment of passengers maneuvered through the curve onto McGill St., then onto Common St. and over Black's Bridge along Mill St., then left onto Riverside and, finally, onto the Victoria Bridge. It was nearing 2:00 am and car #326 having completed its last run rested silently in front of the St. Lambert shops. Work began immediately on that Sunday evening to remove the M&SC tracks from the Victoria Bridge as the electric cars made way for automobiles, trucks and buses.

It would take another year before the final chapter of the company would be closed forever. On the evening of October 13, 1956 and early morning hours of October 14, almost 47 years of electric service came to an end. Earlier on that day, 45 members of the Canadian Railroad Historical Association made a commemorative trip on a special. Car #101 made the final inbound suburban trip from Greenfield Park and Mackayville to St. Lambert, entering the shops at 12:40 am on the Sunday morning. Earlier on the Saturday evening, car #609 with train #438 made the final run to Marieville on the Granby subdivision arriving there at 8:00 pm. Car #608, which had made the final run to Ste. Angele earlier that day, backed from the storage track to join the waiting #609. With motorman Y. Lefort at the controls and conductor J. Pelletier in charge, the final trip home commenced. A stop was made at M&SC Junction to advise Mr. Lamoureau, Chief of the company's power department, to cut the power from Granby up to the junction. The cars then proceeded through Greenfield Park and Mackayville, swung through the underpass on Riverside Drive and entered the Waterman siding in St. Lambert. Mr. Pelletier removed the markers while Mr. Lefort lowered the trolley pole. Almost 47 years of operation was over which today, 53 years later, is but a distant memory.

Crossing Black's Bridge over the Lachine Canal in June 1955. (Source: C. Robert Craig Memorial Library, Kenneth F. Chivers Collection C1-CS1280)



On chemin St. Charles approaching chemin Chambly. (Source : Collection George Lulham. Fonds Banque Laurentienne/Ville de Longueuil, déposé à la Societe d'histoire de Longueuil)

Today, equipment from the M&SC, some has been fortunately preserved at Exporail, St. Constant/Delson, Quebec (104 & 611); Halton County Radial Railway Museum, Milton, Ontario (107); Shoreline Trolley Museum, East Haven, Connecticut (9) and Seashore Trolley Museum, Kennebunk, Maine (504, 610 & 621).