

# A Community and a Workplace

## THE LOCOMOTIVE REPAIR SHOPS

The Grand Trunk Railway shops in Stratford, later part of the Canadian National Railways, were for most of their existence the largest employer in Stratford, for years employing over 40% of the workers in the city. The period from 1870 to 1964 coincided with the hey-day of the steam locomotive.

The Grand Trunk Railway and its competitor, the Buffalo and Lake Huron Railway, both arrived in Stratford in the fall of 1856, ushering in a new era of development for the new village. The well-financed GTR soon took over its competitor here, as well as other lines. This growth meant that by 1870 the GTR had to build new shop facilities for its locomotives in southwestern Ontario.

The company sent out one of its superintendents, T.H. Roberts, to investigate various sites for the location of a locomotive repair shop. Stratford was one of these locations, perfectly located at crossroads of the main (trunk) line from Quebec to Chicago and the east-west line from Buffalo to Goderich on Lake Huron.

When Mr. Roberts visited Stratford, Mayor Thomas M. Daly invited him to dinner to meet his daughter. Mr. Roberts' interest in, and subsequent marriage to, Miss Daly seems to have influenced the final choice, and Stratford was chosen.



The original shops were built and opened in 1871, causing about three hundred families to move into the village overnight. With a shortage of housing to accommodate so many newcomers, many had to live in tents on the railway lands, until enough houses could be built.

During the 1880s and 1890s the GTR continued to acquire other railways, including its chief rival, the Great Western Railway running from Hamilton to Detroit. The takeover led to the first major expansion of the Stratford shops in 1889, when the GWR's Hamilton shops were closed. Another major expansion followed in 1907 when the present structure was built. In each of these cases, many more families settled in the city.

At the same time the size of the locomotives had increased substantially, so that these expansions coincided with the need for more space to work on the engines. The final addition to the shops in the late 1940s (along the St. David Street side) was to accommodate the even larger locomotives.

However, the writing was soon on the wall as new diesel engines were taking over. Between 1958 and 1964, the CNR (which had absorbed the GTR in 1923) phased out the locomotive shops as more and more of the building (and some staff) were transferred to boilermakers, Cooper-Bessemer Ltd, or to shops elsewhere.

The shops employed many skilled tradesmen who first belonged to various British unions. Seemingly unhappy with the distant British links, the machinists initiated a shift to North American unions. The first Canadian local of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) was organized at the Stratford shops in 1890. Other trades followed. The negotiating strength meant that employees had better wages and fringe benefits than other workers, and the shops were seen as the best place to work.

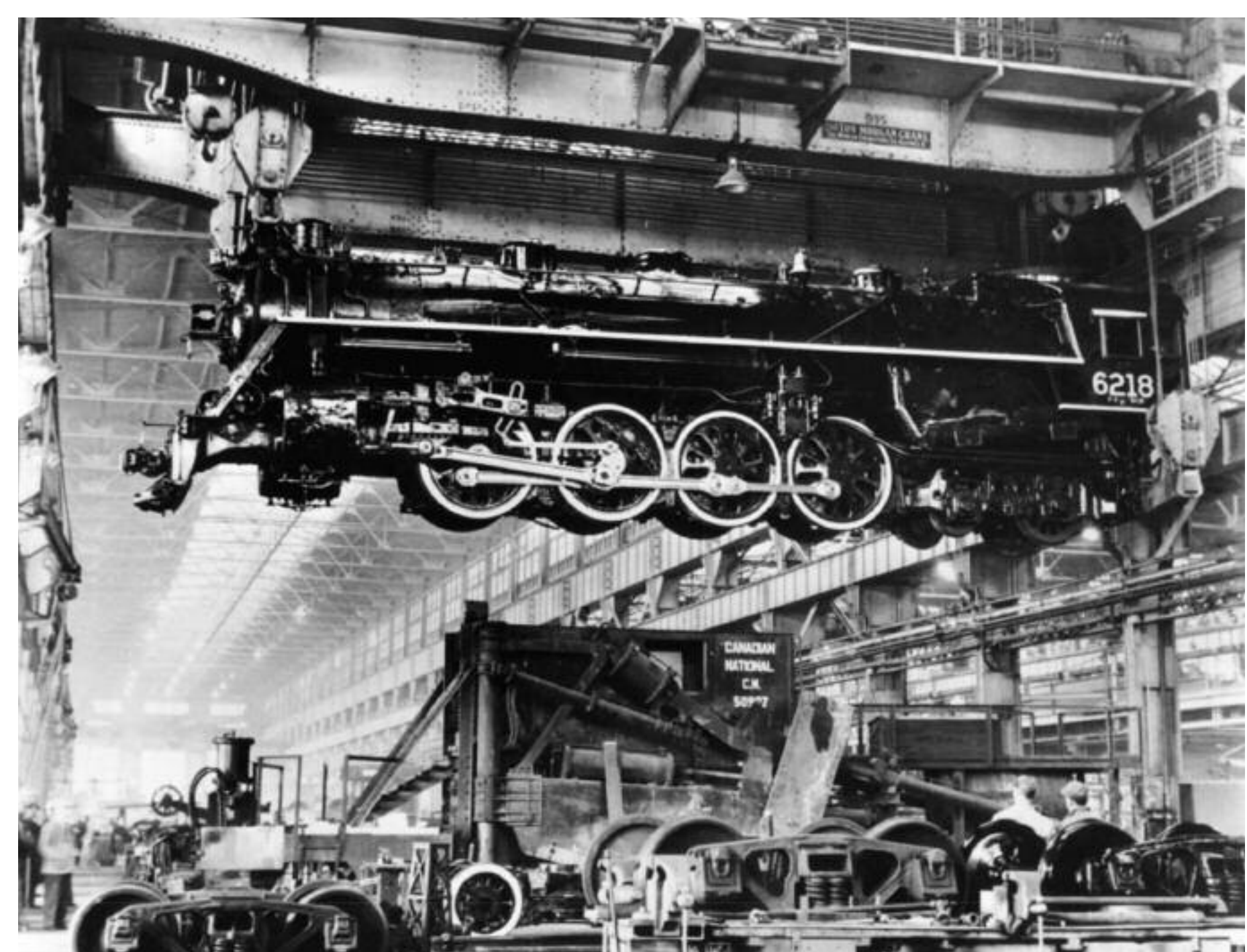


For training, the shops developed a school for apprentices. From 1908 a separate building along Downie Street housed the classrooms. For many years the enrolment was about 130 apprentices.

The shops' employees also organized their own substantial circulating library, their own concert band, and their own athletic association, which sponsored teams in various leagues. The association was instrumental in the building of the YMCA on a corner of the shops property. The original Y building and pool (1904-1968) were heated by hot water pipes connected to the boilers at the shops.

The CNR building has been vacant since 1989. A fire destroyed the wing at the west end in 2002. However, the community of the CNR shops is still fondly remembered by the many families in the city who were connected with the shops.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: INTERIOR OF THE ERECTING SHOP, 1908; APPRENTICES IN THE CLASSROOM, 1920S; THE LAST ENGINE REPAIRED IN STRATFORD, 1963; AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE CNR SHOPS, 1919.