



McGaw Station with living quarters for the station agent and family. This photograph was taken in 1964 by John R. Hardy, shortly before the station was demolished.

McGaw Station was Huron County's outlet to the world

By David Yates Originally published in the *Goderich Signal Star*, September 1, 2022

The McGaw Station was a just tiny node on the Canadian Pacific Rail network which stretched across the continent. Located in Colborne Township about eight miles east of Goderich where the Goderich to Guelph trail crosses the Carlow Road to Benmiller, McGaw Station was the area's outlet to the world. Passengers and freight could be shipped from McGaw to anywhere in North America with a railway.

Built in 1907, the McGaw Station's location outside of any town or village was a condition that the Colborne council extracted from the CPR for granting a right-of-way through the township. Although it was situated in an isolated location, the station served Benmiller, Leeburn, Westfield, Porter's Hill, Carlow, the Nile, Dungannon, Port Albert and the area's scattered farming community.

It is not known for certain where McGaw Station derived its name but it could have been named by Harry McGaw, a CPR engineer, as a tribute to his mother who died in Goderich in February 1907. McGaw Station and rail siding became operational when the 95-mile (152-kilometre) CPR line officially opened between Goderich and Guelph on August 26, 1907. The large frame station building was built by the CPR's Bridge and Building Company and had a platform, ticket office, waiting and baggage rooms as well as modest living quarters for the station agent and his family.

Running a continent-wide rail network was a complex task. The McGaw Station agent kept the trains running according to an intricate timetable. They arranged rolling stock, oversaw ticket sales, mail and baggage handling. Under the station agent was the section foreman who was in charge of maintaining the McGaw rail section from Meneset in the west to Shapit in the east. He supervised a small crew who laid down and repaired track, coupled cars and kept the rolling stock moving.

From the start, McGaw Station did a brisk business. In October 1907, the Clinton News Record noted that “the CPR is doing quite a business at McGaw Station both in passengers and freight. Apples and livestock make up the principal freight.”

The Huron Signal, in reporting on the week’s freight in April 1909, reported that McGaw Station was “becoming quite a shipping point for this locality.” Indeed, a story in December 1908 had humorously asked “Who Will Be the First Mayor of McGaw?”

With the “many proposed improvements that promise to make our new CPR station the centre of a big trade and thriving town in the near future” the Signal believed that “situated as it is in the midst of a fine agricultural district” that “McGaw is drawing attention of speculators, who have been spying out the land with a view to investment.” Although no town materialized, by 1920, a granary, coal shed and stockyard were erected around McGaw Station.

Because of its isolated location, McGaw Station seemed a haven for bootleggers. In February 1916, when the Canada Temperance Act was in force, Cooper Robinson was fined \$50 for trying to claim a 10-gallon keg of alcohol under an assumed name by a suspicious railworker.

In 1917, Clinton Constable Pellow on hearing that a whisky keg was arriving at McGaw, made five trips to the station before Cliff Levy finally showed up to claim his alcohol. Levy was charged and fined \$50. His accomplice, Roy Graham, was charged \$30 for bringing alcohol into Huron County.

During the 1918 Spanish Influenza epidemic, railway workers suffered more than most occupations as the infected spread the disease on the rail lines to every corner of the country. McGaw Station agent, 30-year-old Harry Churchill died of the disease on Jan. 1, 1919. The next day, Auburn Station agent E. W Holtorff also died of the influenza. Churchill left a wife and daughter who were forced to move out of station quarters to make room for the next station agent and family.

Yet, the end of the Great War also brought happy reunions as soldiers returned home. The McGaw Station was decked out in flags and bunting for the return of brothers Howard and Benson Case in April 1919. The entire village of Dungannon turned out to McGaw to welcome the brothers home. Private Harold Allin returned home and immediately resumed his CPR job on the McGaw section.

The early 1920s saw the heyday of activity at McGaw Station. Weekly notices of the number of carloads of poultry, cattle, hogs, grains, fruits and honey were regularly reported in the local papers. Freight weights determined the cost of shipping. James Chisholm, of Leeburn, shipped

out the heaviest hog at over 750 pounds from McGaw Station in April 1918. Chisholm's pride in raising the purebred Chester White was tempered by having to pay the \$20 shipping fare. Poultry purchasers advised farmers that "poultry must be starved" to save on shipping freight.

Despite the shipping rates, dozens of carloads of produce and livestock were shipped out every week. Charlie Leckie, a 48-year CPR railway man, recalled that in 1924 200 cans of milk were picked up daily at McGaw with trains rumbling by every 20 minutes. Trains dropped off coal, shingles, wood products, fertilizer, machinery and a vast array of farm products from across North America.

In 1927, CPR carpenters added to the home of section foreman, Arthur Hoy's McGaw house, and made other improvements to the station area. The upgrades were necessary to host Huron County's first Bacon Hog Fair in April 1927 at McGaw Station. The fair showed a total of 200 animals and created a boom in hog producing in the county.

During the Great Depression, McGaw Station rallied to the aid of their fellow Canadians in drought-plagued prairies from starvation. In fall 1931, Benmiller United Church minister Rev. W.J. Patton organized seven carloads of food and clothing for immediate shipment to rural Saskatchewan where Canadians experienced famine conditions. In thanking the people of "Old Huron" one Regina woman said, "Huron is, indeed, a land overflowing with milk and honey, and when the cry went up from stricken Saskatchewan, old Huron answered generously, lovingly and with both hands." More relief carloads went west from McGaw in 1932. The relief trains ended only when the threat of starvation abated.

The 1930s also brought about a transportation revolution. Trucks now began to replace rails as the favoured mode of shipping. After the Second World War, with the end of gas rationing, the railways experienced a steep decline in passenger and freight traffic. Driving a car direct to one's destination or trucking livestock and produce direct from farm to the market was more convenient than rail transport. Colborne historian Harry McCreath said that "trucks knocked the wind out of" McGaw Station.

In 1954, McGaw station was downgraded with the removal of the station agent. The daily passenger train service was terminated along the Goderich to Guelph CPR line in April 1955. One of those riding that last passenger train was Arthur Hoy. Hoy was a passenger on the first passenger train into Goderich in 1907. He had worked as foreman on the McGaw section for 27 years before his retirement in 1949. Hoy's son, William, was still serving as section foreman when the station closed in June 1964.

When the station closed, tenders went out for the demolition of the old building within 60 days. Although the cattle pens remained for a while, the last train ran on the Goderich to Guelph CPR line ran in December 1988. The tracks were torn up and the old rail bed forms the G2G trail.

No vestige of the McGaw station remains today. Only a wood marker indicates that there was once a bustling rail yard that opened up the world to an isolated rural district in Ontario.

