

# HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

## RAILWAY STATION REPORT

**Title:** Former Canadian National Railways/VIA Rail Station  
Oba, Ontario

**Source:** PETERSON PROJECTS, Murray Peterson, Winnipeg

# RSR-153

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### INTRODUCTION

The former Canadian National Railways (CNR)/VIA Rail station at Oba was built in ca. 1913<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1) as a shared facility of the Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR) and the Algoma Central Railway (ACR). Oba is located 686 rail miles east of Montreal, Quebec on the CNoR and Mile 244.7 north of Sault Ste. Marie on the ACR (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> The town, because of its location at the junction of two major railways, enjoyed several decades of stable growth. Changes in the railway industry since the 1950s, however, have drastically reduced Oba's role within the systems. Virtually all of the original railway complex has been abandoned and demolished, as has much of the town. The station was boarded up in 1989.

The station originally served as a passenger and freight depot, and included living quarters for employees. It now stands vacant. Vandalism has been extensive and the structure is deteriorating quickly.

### HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

#### Thematic

By the early 1910s Canada's second and third transcontinental railway systems were nearing completion. For both, the worst construction was saved for last. Lines through the Rocky Mountains and northern Quebec and Ontario would be expensive and slow to build. For northern Ontario, like other isolated regions, the coming of the railways significantly altered life, by developing a modern communications system, reducing isolation and creating towns and communities where none had existed previously. Oba and its station are representative of the type of development spawned by the coming of a transcontinental line prior to World War I.

The CNoR was incorporated in 1899 as the result of the merging of two small Manitoba branch lines. Its owners, William Mackenzie and Donald Mann, saw for themselves a major role in the railway

industry in Canada. By 1901 they had begun to purchase, acquire and lay track in an attempt to compete with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

Over the next decade, the CNoR began a large-scale program of amalgamation and construction that gave the company nearly 3,700 miles of track nation-wide. Only 353.7 miles of this total was located in Ontario, which included mileage from Port Arthur to the Manitoba border, Toronto to Sudbury and other connected lines in southern Ontario.<sup>3</sup> In the final push to create a transcontinental line, Mackenzie and Mann began to build the two most difficult sections: over the Rocky Mountains, and from Montreal to Port Arthur (present-day Thunder Bay), Ontario. The latter ran through the rugged Canadian Shield north of the Great Lakes and posed many engineering difficulties.

In 1911, with Prime Minister Laurier under attack as unpatriotic for his reciprocity proposals, and the CNoR facing financial difficulties, Mackenzie and Mann pressed the federal government for assistance to complete this section, ensuring an all-Canadian route.<sup>4</sup> An agreement was reached whereby the government provided a bond guarantee of \$35,000 per mile between Port Arthur and Montreal, and the Ontario government granted the CNoR 4,000 acres of land per mile completed between Sudbury and Port Arthur by 1913.<sup>5</sup> For the CNoR, it paved the way for construction in northern Ontario, and for Laurier it would "reaffirm dramatically his support for the Canadian trade patterns that had been developed."<sup>6</sup>

Construction through northern Ontario was slow and expensive, but the route chosen, north of the CPR and the lakeshore, proved less costly than that of the earlier carrier. Construction contracts were let to Foley Brothers and Northern Construction in the summer of 1911, and by November approximately 3,000 men were working on the line east from Port Arthur and west from Sudbury.<sup>7</sup> Grading proved difficult and most of the bed was not ready for track until 1913. When track was finally laid, it was done from both ends and the middle, at a small community called Oba.<sup>8</sup> The last spike of the northern Ontario section was driven by Mackenzie at Little White Otter River (254 miles east of Port Arthur) on January 1, 1914. In 1913, the section had an average daily workforce of nearly 7,000 men and over 800 horses, and it used 15½ million feet of timber for trestles and 2,900 tons of steel in bridges.<sup>9</sup>

The last spike of the entire line was driven in January of 1915 and by the end of that year it was fully functional from coast to coast.<sup>10</sup> But the cost of the CNoR's expansion, stiff competition from other lines and the war spelt doom for the railway. In June of 1919 it was taken over by the federal government as part of a large-scale rescue effort of the railway industry. Between 1917 and 1923, the federal government acquired

five financially troubled railways, amalgamating them as the CNR: the Grand Trunk, its subsidiary the Grand Trunk Pacific, the National Transcontinental, the Intercolonial and the CNoR.<sup>11</sup>

The second railway to pass through Oba was the ACR, incorporated in August of 1899 by industrial interests in Sault Ste. Marie in order to exploit the rich mineral deposits and timber stands north of the town.<sup>12</sup> Nearly 20 miles of track were laid in 1899 and 1900, with another 12 miles of branch line also completed. The name was changed in 1901 to the Algoma Central and Hudson Bay Railway, reflecting the more far-reaching goals of its backers.<sup>13</sup> In 1903, however, financial collapse of the ACR and of Sault Ste. Marie halted construction until 1910. The line opened the north to traffic as far as the CPR main line on December 1, 1912 and by November of 1914 the line was completed to its present northern terminus, Hearst, Ontario, on what was then the National Transcontinental Railway line (Mile 295.7 from Sault Ste. Marie).<sup>14</sup> The ACR, therefore, held the unusual distinction of crossing all three transcontinental lines (Figure 2).

Construction of both lines neared completion around the same time. It may have been that crews from both lines worked around Oba within sight of each other. Oba, from its very beginning, was a two railway town in the eyes of the railways and the citizens. The CNoR and ACR shared the depot, which had been built by the Imperial Construction Company of Toronto.<sup>15</sup>

Early in the history of railway development, rivalry between competing railway companies had led to the construction of more than one station in both large and small communities. But by the turn of the century, the cost-saving advantages of union stations were fully accepted by most railway companies. Examples of union stations can be found across northern Ontario and the rest of Canada as well.

### Local Development

Oba originally developed as a minor service stop along the CNoR and ACR lines and became a stop-over point for crews. When constructed, this station was among the first of several along the CNoR in northern Ontario and, in a process repeated in many small towns throughout Canada, the station created and reinforced the fledgling community's identity and self-worth. It is illustrative of the type of rural station built by all railway companies in all parts of Canada. This double train service allowed for a stable economic base in the isolated community, even though it was never considered a major centre in either system.<sup>16</sup>

The name "Oba" is taken from the Indian word "obatanga" which means "many bends" and refers to drainage systems in the area.<sup>17</sup> It was first settled on a seasonal basis by native bands, hunting and fishing in the area.

With the railway jobs came men and families and other businesses soon followed. Because of its location at a busy junction, Oba became the permanent station for personnel from each company. Refuelling of the steam engines, originally with local wood supplies and later with coal,<sup>18</sup> watering of the engines and minor repairs were all performed by employees of both railways. Crew changes were also completed at Oba. At its peak Oba had a population of approximately 300 and included stores, a hotel, and a school.

The station, a shared facility, was located north of the CNOR line and south of the ACR. It furnished Oba with a sense of permanency and stability and, as in countless other northern hamlets, became the hub of all town activity.

The switch to diesel engines had a profound effect on Oba. The community had never developed secondary employment during the steam era. The town was, for all intents and purposes, a railway town. Jobs connected with the refuelling and repair facilities were terminated due to the switch to diesel locomotives in the late 1950s and the resulting closure of the Oba facilities. It was also not necessary, due to the increased travelling capacity of the engines, to bunk crews at Oba (although at present both railway companies operate small temporary living quarters for employees on the line). With no railway jobs and no other chance for employment, Oba was abandoned in the 1980s.

## **ARCHITECTURE**

### Aesthetic/Visual Qualities

The former CNR/VIA Rail station is the only CNOR station in northern Ontario yet to come to light having a corner tower. Otherwise, it is a plain but handsome two-storey stuccoed frame structure with a one-storey wing on its east end (Figures 3 and 4). The station was an in-house design by the CNOR, but it was built by the Imperial Construction Company of Toronto, which had been contracted by the railway company to erect a number of their northern Ontario stations. It offers approximately 1,400 square feet of floor space on the main level (Figure 5). The south facade features heavy overhanging eaves that act as protection against the elements. The eaves encircle the entire structure and are supported by elaborate and oversized wooden brackets similar to those used on other Canadian rural stations. Window and door openings on this level are unadorned and finished with plain wooden frames. Large loading doors are located on either side of the building. The partial second floor is located at the west end of the station.

The two track façades are relatively plain, and include many elements typical of CNOR stations. The heavy bracketed eaves which form a canopy, the partial second storey and the dearth of

ornamentation are standard features of rural stations. The uniqueness of the Oba design comes from the west end elevation (Figure 6), which is unusually elaborate and is atypical in northern Ontario. Most prominent is the two-storey corner tower, a six-sided structure divided horizontally by the first floor eaves and covered by a polygonal roof. In rural areas, projections added to increase the station master's view of the platform and track usually take the form of one-storey bay windows. It is more unusual to find a bay that is more than one storey in height and even more unusual, especially in northern Ontario, to utilize a tower. While the corner tower is not uncommon in both CNR and CPR stations elsewhere in Ontario, it is usually reserved for larger, more substantial depots.

Whereas most of the stations include the bay on the face of the track side elevation, here it is located on the southwest corner, thus offering the occupant a clear view of the CNOR tracks and also a good view of the ACR track to the west.

The roof is without dormers but still relatively complex. Over the one-storey wing it is of bellcast hip design and medium-pitched. The two-storey section is covered by a series of connecting medium-pitched hip roofs, as well as the corner tower roof.

Aside from the boarding up of the windows, there does not appear to have been any major alterations to the exterior, although the stuccoing was likely part of the nation-wide policy carried out by the CNR during the 1930s to improve insulation in its stations. Two larger doors, one on each of the north and south facades, which originally led to the baggage area, have been closed.

#### Functional/Technological Qualities

This rural station, like hundreds of others, had to provide all the services offered by the two railway companies operating it. Efficiency in the layout of the interior was paramount in order to save time and construction costs. The building was internally divided to create areas for passengers and their baggage (always separated), and office space for railway crews and the station master. The Oba station featured a baggage room on the east end, a manager's office and ticket counter in the southwest corner (including the tower) and a waiting room in the northwest corner. In total, the building provided 1,400 square feet of main floor space.

The second floor, which could not be seen, was likely used as living quarters for the station master and his family. Given the scarcity of residential structures in Oba at the time of construction, it was necessary for the railways to provide living space for their station manager. The most convenient and cost-effective method was to add a partial second storey to the station.

At present, much of the interior has been renovated and all of the main floor has suffered from neglect and the lack of heat. While the basic floor plan has seen only minor changes, the baggage room alone has been left in its original state. This area, however, has been most damaged by the weather (Figure 7). The renovations to the office have included a new ceiling and wall panelling (Figures 8 and 9). The waiting room has been similarly altered (Figure 10), although the windows and frame remain original.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

### Setting

The two sets of railway tracks and the union station marked the southern boundary of the community of Oba, with all development occurring to the north (Figure 11). This development, however, was limited in area, and most of the buildings were located near the station.

Most of the community's original building stock has been demolished or abandoned (Figure 12), making the station one of the oldest buildings in the area. The once busy railway complex for refuelling and minor repairs (Figure 13) is now almost deserted, due to the conversion of locomotive power from steam to diesel in the 1950s. This station is, along with a group of small storage sheds south of the CNR tracks, the only original railway-related building left standing.

### Community Status

Permanent residents of Oba presently number less than 20, although 30 to 40 men are employed throughout the year in hunting and fishing camps nearby. Both the ACR and the CNR have crew houses which are occupied frequently for stopovers (overnight) and for short-term use as rest and lunch facilities.

Because the community is still a stop on both VIA Rail and the ACR, passengers continue to use the station's eaves as protection against the elements.<sup>19</sup> Between 150 and 200 people stop at Oba each year to take advantage of the hunting. The train is still the major form of transportation in and out of the area and therefore this station continues to be at the centre of activity at Oba.

### Endnotes

- 1 The Railway and Shipping World (below as RSW) which became The Railway and Marine World (below as RMW), 1898 to 1915. Records of the CNR list the date of construction as 1900, but there is no evidence that any railway line had been

constructed in this area of northern Ontario at this time. It is likely that the station was built in conjunction with the laying of track by both the CNoR and the ACR, making the approximate date of construction of the station 1913.

- 2 RMW, (September 1913), p. 405; and Dale Wilson, The Algoma Central Railway Story (Sudbury: Nickel Belt Rails, 1984), p. 11.
- 3 T.D. Regehr, The Canadian Northern Railway (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), p. 476.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 316-17.
- 5 RMW, (March 1911), p. 231.
- 6 Regehr, *op. cit.*, p. 317.
- 7 RMW, (August 1911), p. 743 and (November 1911), p. 1055.
- 8 RMW, (July 1912), p. 336, (January 1913), p. 33, (June 1913), p. 269 and (August 1913), p. 380.
- 9 RMW, (February 1914), p. 73 and (March 1914), p. 126.
- 10 The Canadian Encyclopedia (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), Volume 1, p. 346.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p. 345.
- 12 J. Konarek, "Algoma Central and Hudson Bay Railway: The Beginnings," in Ontario History, Volume LXII, 1970, pp. 75-76.
- 13 RSW, (November 1900), p. 332, and (May 1901), p. 153. The name change had little effect and the line has almost always been referred to as the ACR.
- 14 RMW, (September 1913), p. 432 and (November 1914), p. 501; and D. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- 15 RSW, (August 1913), p. 380.
- 16 The author wishes to thank CNR Assistant Track Supervisor Keith Bromley, Hornepayne, Ontario, for his patience and assistance. His knowledge and support were greatly appreciated.
- 17 Maude Grant, long-time resident of Oba, in conversation with author, 27 October 1992.
- 18 *Ibid.*

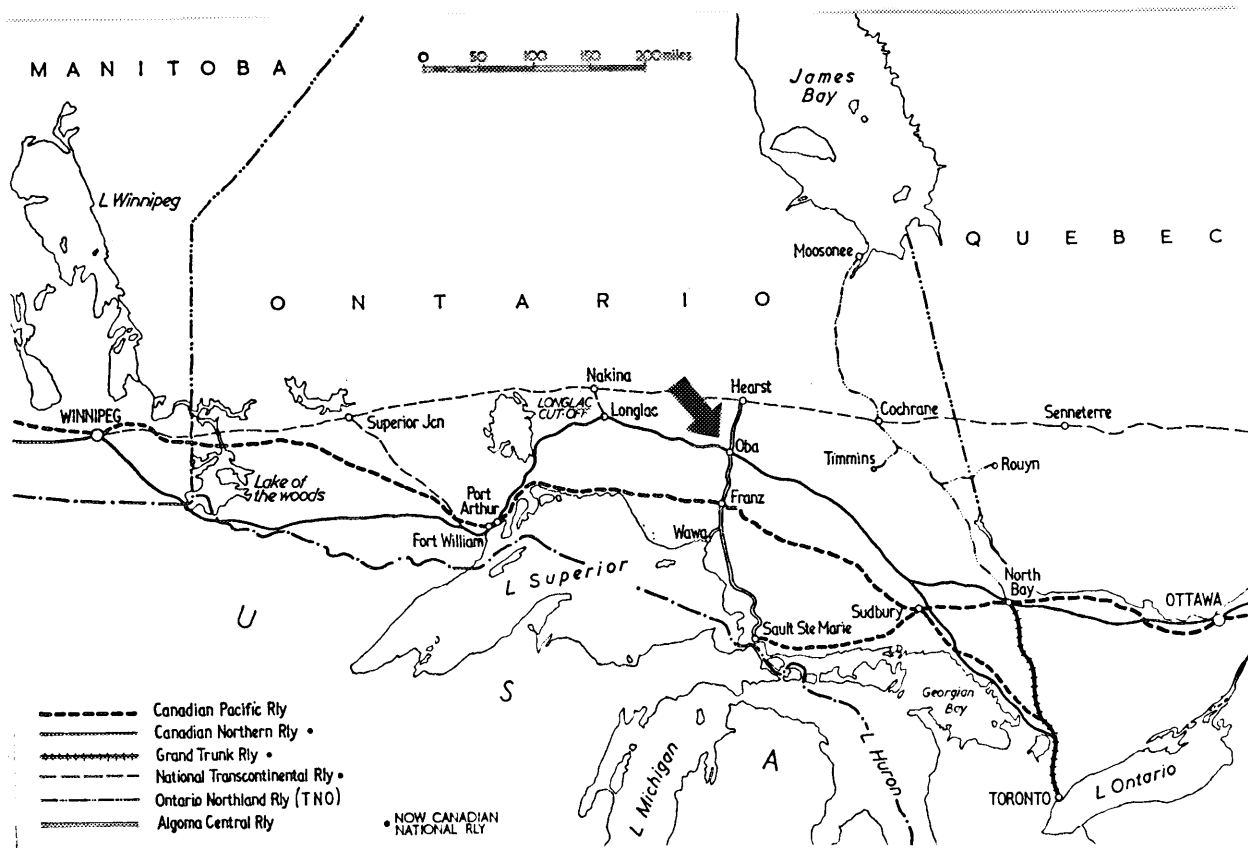
19 Hazel Blanchette, Oba resident and hotel owner, in conversation with the author, 15 November 1992.

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



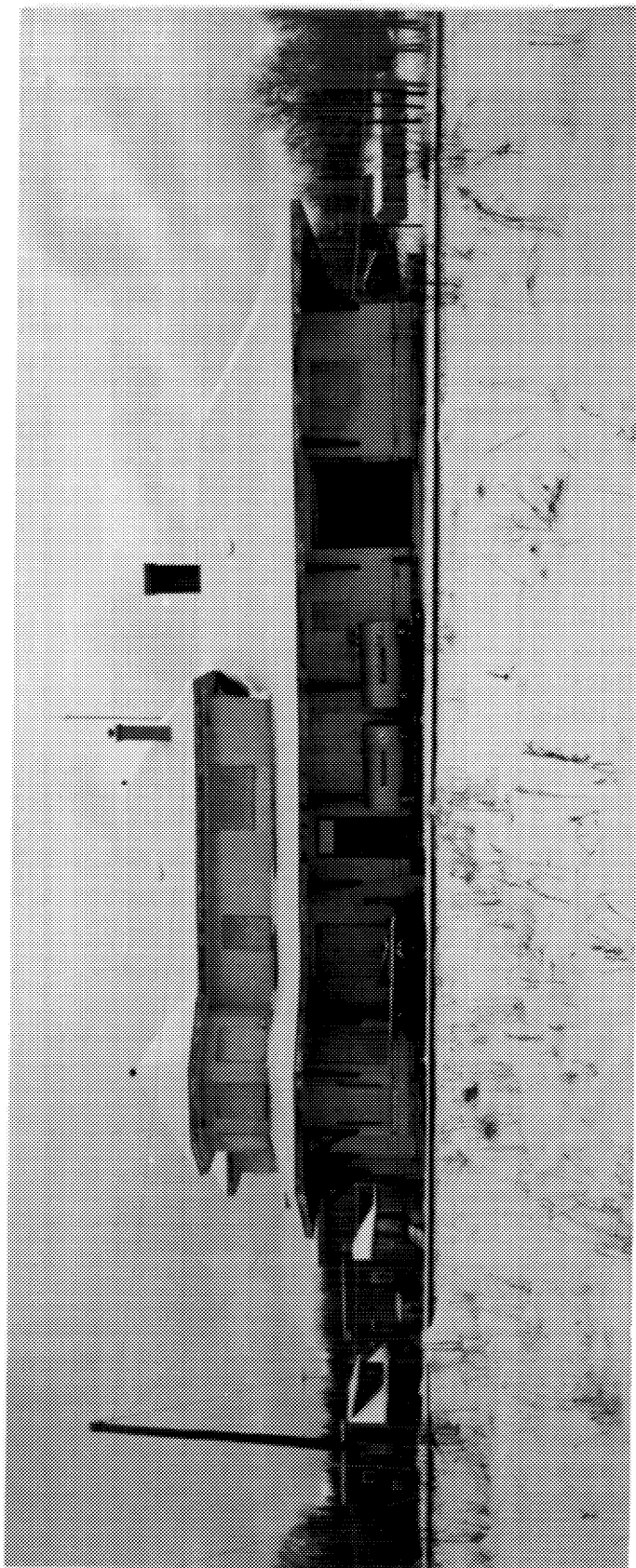
- 1 Former Canadian National Railways (CNR)/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario; built ca. 1913 by the Imperial Construction Company, Toronto; CNR track side or south façade. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



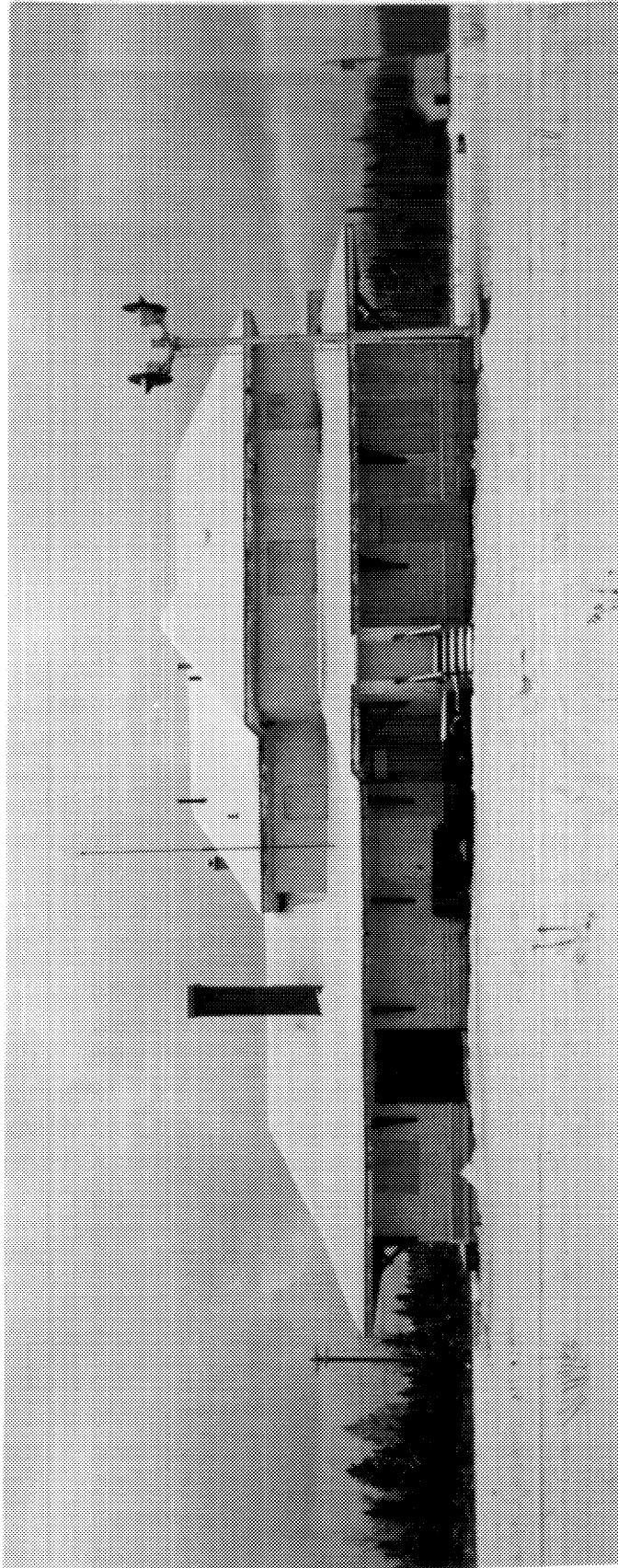
2 "Canadian railways around the Great Lakes," arrow indicates Oba, Ontario. (Reproduced from R.F. Legget, Railroads of Canada, [Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1973], p. 116.)

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



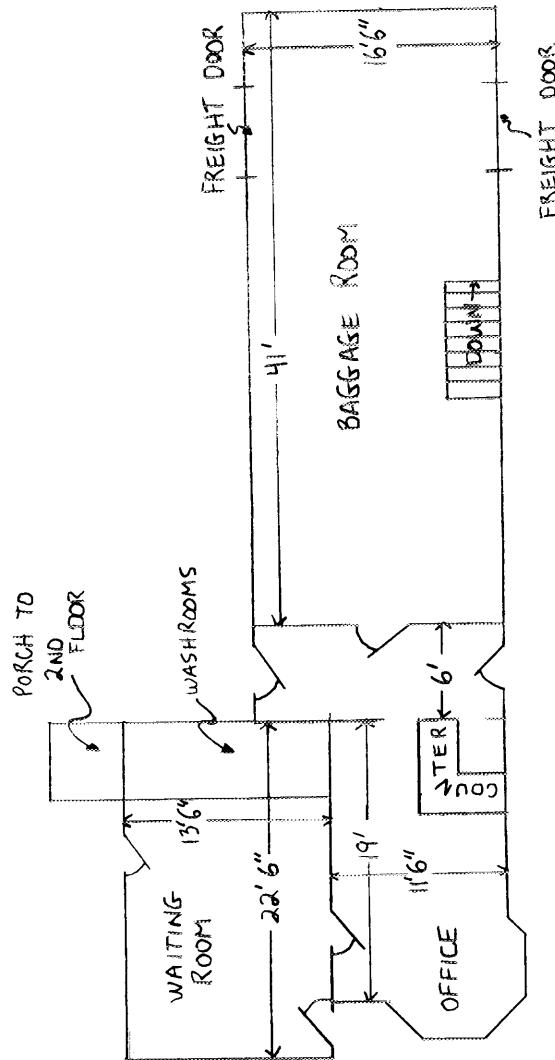
3 Former CNR/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario, CNR or south  
façade. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



4 Former CNR/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario, Algoma Central Railway (ACR) or north façade. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



5 Former CNR/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario, ground floor plan (all measurements approximate). (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



6 Former CNR/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario, west end.  
(Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



7 Former CNR/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario, baggage room looking towards the east end of the station. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)



8 Former CNR/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario, office/ticket counter area. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



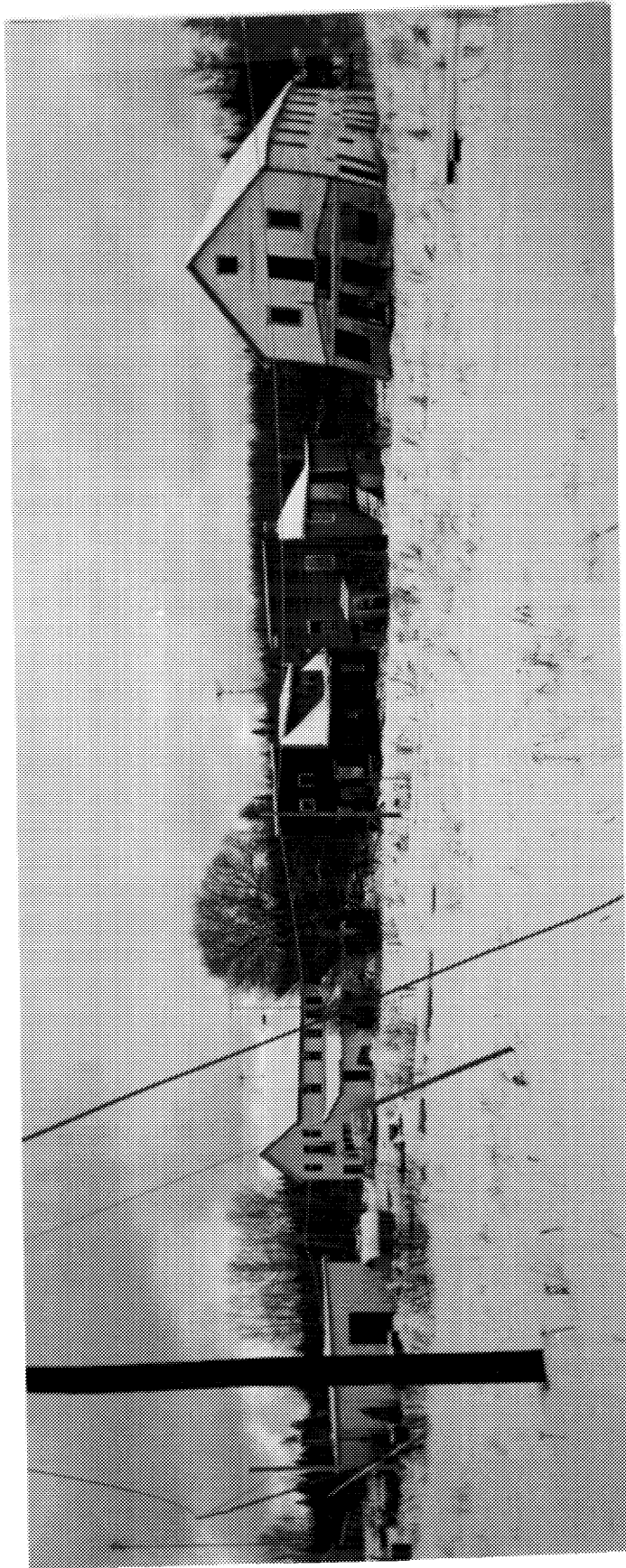
9 Former CNR/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario, first floor bay window. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)



10 Former CNR/VIA Rail station, Oba, Ontario, waiting room. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

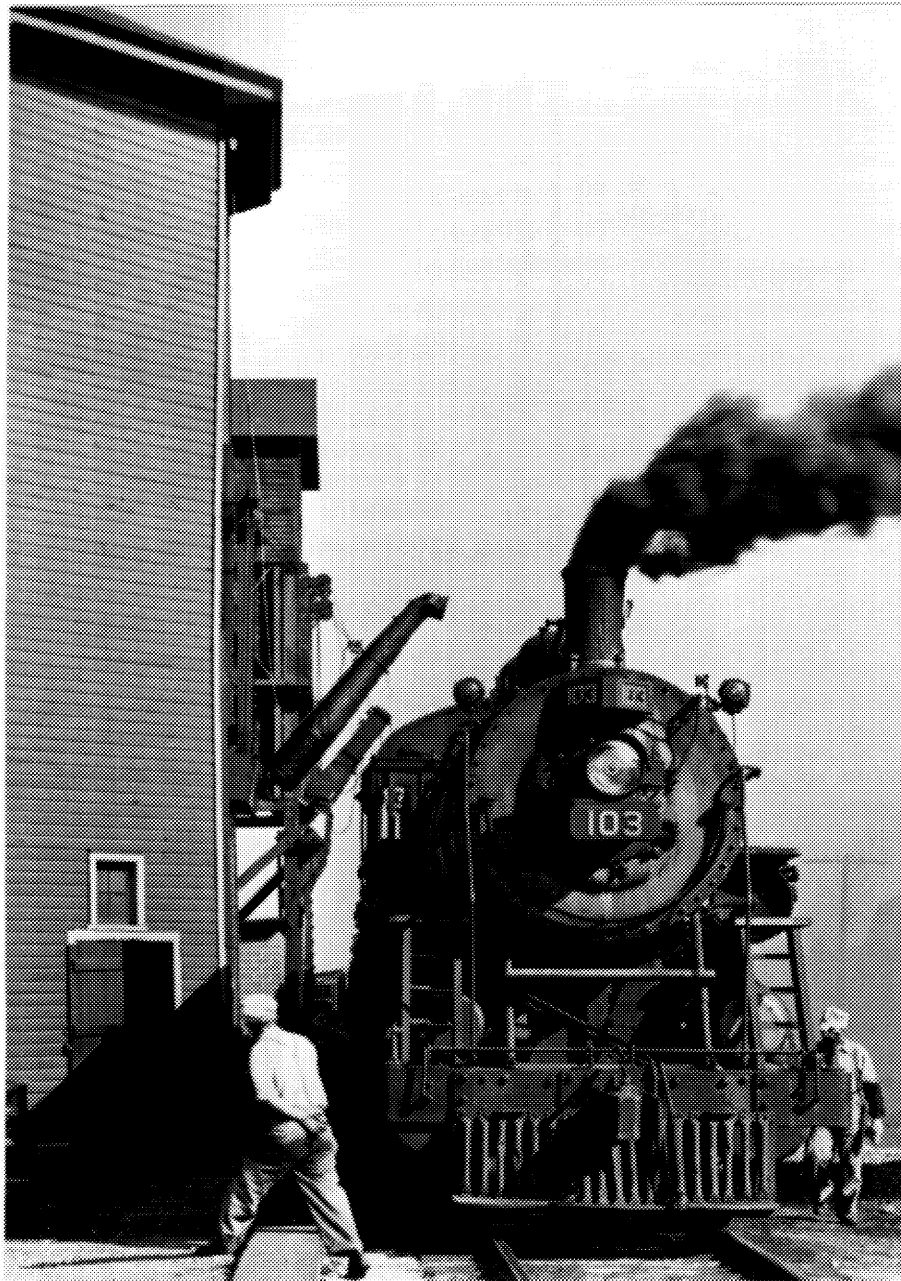


FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



12 Oba, Ontario, showing part of the original main street shops, now abandoned. The large structure on the right is the original hotel. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CNR/VIA RAIL STATION, OBA, ONTARIO



13 Refuelling and servicing steam engine at Oba, Ontario, n.d.  
(Courtesy of W.J. McComb, Supervisor, ACR.)