

The Steam Powered Tractor

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Several years ago I had scanned pictures that had been kept at the family farm in Domrémy. Among a stack of photos was one of a steam powered tractor riding along frozen ground. Nobody knew much about it so it sat as a mystery.

I did a little research and to my surprise I located the exact, identical photo on a web site dedicated to a northern Saskatchewan town called Big River. The small town is about 100km NW of Prince Albert (between P.A. and Meadow Lake) and its primary industry has been timber and lumber since the early 1900s. Today the town has about 600 residents.

The web site, www.jkcc.com, describes the unit as a “Dinkey” Engine and was used to haul timber. Several of these were working in Saskatchewan and Manitoba starting in the 1910s, and 2 are preserved today with the [Western Development Museums](#), one in North Battleford, and the other in Saskatoon.

The “Phoenix Centipede” Log Haulers, as they were branded, were built in Wisconsin starting in about 1904. This type of engine was much more efficient at hauling timber to the mill than the estimated 40 teams of horses they each replaced. Rated at 100 horsepower, they had 4 vertical cylinders and needed 3 people to operate: engineer, fireman and the pilot who had to sit outside in the cold. These units went through over a ton of coal per day and had to be watered every few miles. They were used extensively because one unit could haul 9 sleds (7 for timber, one water tank and one caboose) 60 miles per day in any weather. They seemed to be in operation until the mid-1930s.

This photo likely dated to about 1915. One can only assume the photo had been purchased by someone in the family and added to the collection of photos.

...but that is not the end of this story. As I did the research on Big River I saw a photo...



On the web site I saw a picture of a storefront with the sign "O.P. Godin". As it turns out a person by the name of Louis Godin, likely no close relation to our family, set up a bakery in the early 1900s that he later expanded to a general store. The store was a business vital to the area and became a very popular gathering place for the locals and those passing through.

Here is a quote from the web site <https://www.jkcc.com/>

The busiest place in the village was Godin's store (right) over the front door of which hung a homemade sign in large letters that read, "O.P. Godin-Marchand General." Godin a shrewd, sharp-nosed French-Canadian, made his business decisions while listening to his customers and biting on his pipe. He sold any article of food, clothing, or equipment that made life tolerable in the bush. He sold merchandise as varied as ladies hats and bear traps and bought from his customers grain, hay, fur, lumber, railroad ties, fish and Seneca root, a medicinal herb that grows wild in the region. Godin spoke but a few words in one day and these he preferred to utter in French. From any of the general stores a man could buy a year's grubstake and supplies...

The bakery operated separately under Wilfred Godin, and Louis and his family added a butcher shop, drug store, ice cream parlor, invested in a local cheese factory, lumber mill, farmer's supply store and an electrical power plant. Mrs. Godin, a piano player, led a local band that would play for special events and Friday night dances. Needless to say, they were one of the best known families in the region.

Here is another interesting coincidence. Louis gave the store to his son Pete Godin. Pete sold the store in 1945 and moved back to Montreal. The buyers included a person called Paul St Arnaud. Now there may be a relation there. Bertha Godin, my grandmother, was a St Arnaud from Quebec. Perhaps Bruno and Bertha had some friend or family links to the town. Many French from Quebec had settled in the town and general area. That may help explain the presence of the photo in the family album.

Paul Godin