



The view from Churchill – August 2011

Though I've worked around Churchill issues for several years, I'd never had an opportunity to ride the Hudson Bay Railway or tour the Port. I was, at last, able to visit the Port of Churchill earlier this month as a guest of the Churchill Gateway Development Corporation and used the opportunity to travel both ways by rail.

The Hudson Bay Railway runs just over 500 miles from The Pas, MB to Churchill. I travelled on VIA, which leases the track for passenger travel, and enjoyed the trip immensely. It is, as every farmer knows, a very slow ride – my trips both took about 32 hours - but very beautiful and more varied than I had expected. The bridge over the Nelson River at Manitou Rapids is stunning and the coastal lowlands north of Kettle Rapids, where trees become sparse and stunted (no higher than 12-15 feet) and polar bears den to give birth, has a quiet, almost ethereal quality that reminds southerners how sparsely populated the north really is. There had been a derailment the week before, a small group of wayward cars lay twisted and broken at the side of the track near Gillam, but work crews were visible at several points along the line including a long assembly of bunk cars housing crews whose work is ongoing rehabilitation of the track and rail bed.

I was able to represent the Hudson Bay Route Association at the annual ceremony marking arrival of the first grain ship of the season, the Pacific Bulker, a Panamanian-flagged vessel operated by an immensely hospitable crew from the Philippines. Agriculture Minister Stan Struthers was there, on behalf of the Manitoba government, along with representatives from OmniTRAX, the Canadian Wheat Board, the Town of Churchill and others. The crew served us lunch and then offered a complete tour of the vessel. The Pacific Bulker is 176 metres long by 26 metres wide and carries some 27,000 metric tonnes of grain. It can load in about 30 hours if the weather is good and its load of wheat from Churchill was bound for Nigeria.

OmniTRAX provided a tour of the landmark Churchill terminal elevator. It was late in the day and there wasn't a lot of time but our visit was quite thorough. The terminal was completed around 1931 with an annex built in the '50s. Its capacity is 141,000 metric tonnes but for throughput purposes it functions at 110,000. The terminal runs full bore from June, when the first grain trains arrive, until early November, when the last boat leaves. There are four rail lines running through the building. Two are automated, the other two will be converted soon. Both moved very smoothly, with crews quickly levering cars by hand over the receiving chutes on the un-automated lines

with a tool that looks like a long shoe-horn. Canadian Grain Commission (CGC) employees weighed and took samples from each car as it passed by.

The next day I was able to visit the CGC inspectors inside the terminal and watch them work, a very interesting process. Grain samples from each rail car on the unloaded lines are sent by tube to the inspection office where they're graded and assessed for dockage, a process called *inward* inspection. Another tube system provides samples from each spout as ships are loaded; this is the *outward* inspection system. There were seven people working in inspection on the day I visited, four preparing samples and three grading. The wheat samples I saw were mostly from the Swan River area and they were grading twos and threes with dockage as high as 3%. It was raining that day and the Pacific Bulker's hold was closed to loading, so there was no outward inspection, but even so, the inspection office remained a hive of hard work the whole time I was there.

I was fortunate to have several visits with the Town of Churchill Mayor, Michael Spence, and CAO, Albert Meijering. Mayor Spence is a life-long northerner whose family has been in Churchill since he was a small boy. Albert, by contrast, is a former Winnipegger, who's bought a house and taken to the community in a deep way. Both were pleased to show their town and environs and talk about its accomplishments. These include the area's able handling of visiting polar bears and its new Northern Studies Centre, an impressive residential research and education facility scheduled to open on August 24th. But both men also acknowledged the challenge that loss of the Canadian Wheat Board poses to this town of 900. Despite tourism and science, Churchill was and is overwhelmingly a grain port, and the CWB by far is its most important customer: over 90% of all tonnage across the wharf is CWB grains. Mayor Spence, his staff, and citizens remain deeply concerned for the future of Churchill without this town's much valued, anchor customer.

Respectfully submitted,

Bruce Dodds
HBRA Field Representative