The History of Chetwynd's railroad

The first train to Little Prairie, March, 1958. Premier W.A.C. Bennett, Einar Gunderson, J. Kenyon, The Hon. Ray Williston.
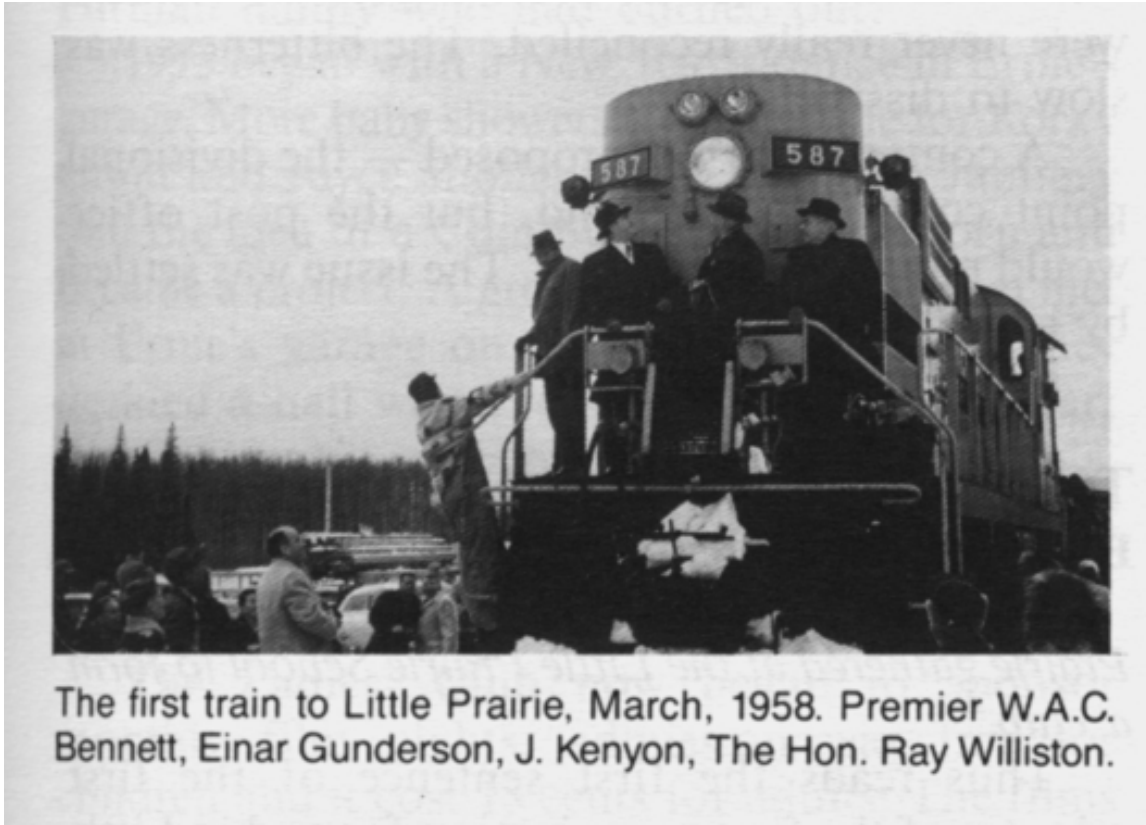
The town of Chetwynd was once known as "Little Prairie" but with the coming of the Pacific Great Eastern (P.G.E) Railroad in 1957, the name of the community was changed to Chetwynd in honour of the Minister in charge of railroads, Ralph Chetwynd.

The Honourable Ralph Chetwynd first came to B.C. in 1908. He settled in Ashcroft, and later became the manager of a fruit farm at Walachin. After the war he returned to the Cariboo

and was associated with cattle ranching and transportation there. In 1952, he was elected MLA for the Cariboo.

Ralph Chetwynd also became a director of the Pacific Great Eastern Railway. He was a staunch advocate of the development of the Peace River Country, with an undying faith in its potential. There is a picture of him in the Chetwynd Pictorial of 1968 that shows him wearing a stack of hats, which he won from scoffers who "bet their hats" that the Pacific Great Eastern (P.G.E). would never get through the Rocky Mountains. He died in April of 1957, missing by a few months the arrival of the railway in the town named for him.
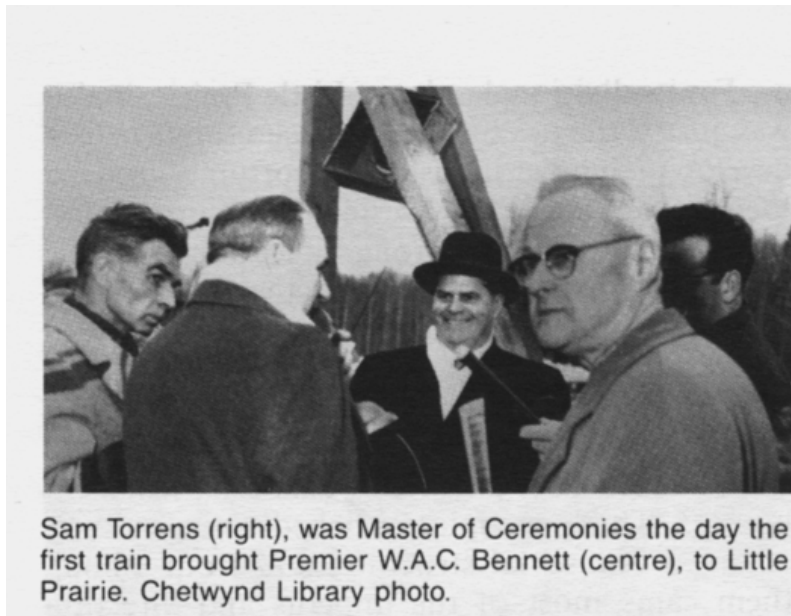
The first train to Chetwynd carried symbolic cars; pipe for the pipeline, rails for the continued extension to Dawson Creek and Fort St. John, and boxcars for grain and lumber.

Little Prairie welcomes Premier W.A.C. Bennett and the P.G.E. Railway. March, 1958.

Twenty six years after Little Prairie's first post office was registered, with P.A. Widmark in charge, a crowd of 3000 people were gathered on its original site, awaiting the arrival of the first train over the Pacific Great Eastern Railway from Vancouver.

It was a blustery March day in 1958. Practically everyone in the local area was on hand to welcome the train, along with hundreds from all over the Peace River District. Many of them had been waiting 30 years for a rail outlet to the west coast.

Sam Torrens (right), was Master of Ceremonies the day the first train brought Premier W.A.C. Bennett (centre), to Little Prairie. Chetwynd Library photo.

Standing in front of the new diesel Engine were Prime Minister W.A.C Bennett, the Honourable Ray Williston, Minister of Lands and Forests, and Einar Gunderson and J. Kenyon of the P.G.E

The train carried cars of pipe; symbolic of natural gas development, steel railway track symbolizing continued extension of the Pacific Great Eastern (P.G.E.), a pig-a-back car with a Northern Freightways van representing the great freight hauling along the Alaska Highway and box cars for shipping the amount of lumber and grain available from the Peace River District.
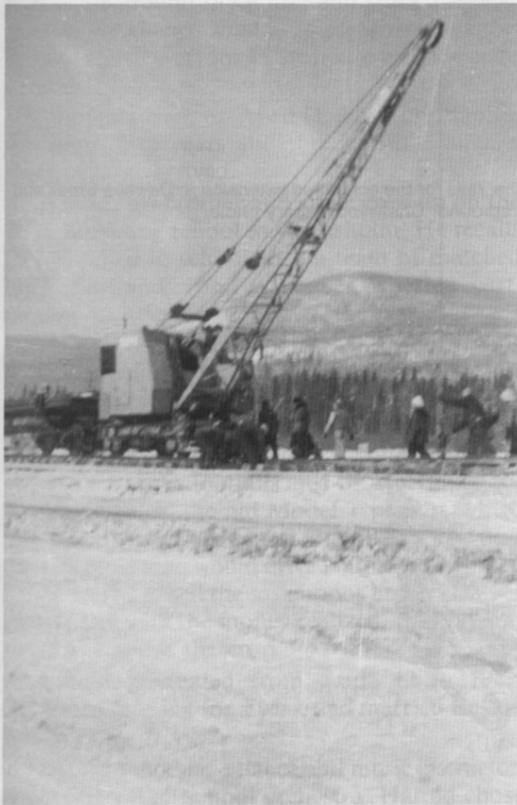
With rail service established, a developing lumber industry supporting a growing local economy, the Westcoast Transmission pipeline in place, and strong indications that the Peace River hydro-electric project would proceed, the location began to attract business and industrial investors.

Tom Nichols sawing ties for the P.G.E. in winter of 1957/58.

P.G.E. Construction Camp. 1958.

Laying track for the P.G.E., near Chetwynd, winter 1957. Photo: Jean Campbell.

Laying ties for the P.G.E., about ten miles west of Chetwynd. Photo: Clara Neuls.

A common occurrence while laying the rail, 1957.

On July 1, 1959 there was an official ceremony and parade to dedicate the new name of Chetwynd. The Canadian Girls in Training, who were organized by Korky Grant, marched in the parade, singing lyrics composed by Irene Campbell, to the melody of "Clementine":

In a valley in the mountains, situated mighty fine
Lived a few hard working settlers, life for them was one hard grind.
Little Prairie served the district, news and mail and groceries too;
Come the railway, better living, changed to Chetwynd and the new.
Say goodbye to Little Prairie and the times that were so fine
Pack our memories in a basket; put the lid on for all time.
People coming, people going, things are always changing round.
To the old folks there's a sadness as the signs are going down.
And the new folks of tomorrow, with the future looking bright
Look ahead with hope and promise, change to Chetwynd, from tonight.

Chetwynd today

Population: 3100
Serving Area: 8000
Elevation: 2019 Feet
Primary Industries: Forestry, oil, gas, & mining, BC
Rail, ranching & tourism