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“That’s No Way to Run a Railroad” The Battle River Branchline and the Politics of Technology in Rural Alberta

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In many ways, there was nothing unusual about the events of 24 January 2009. The farmers of the Battle River Producer Car Group had grown accustomed to erratic service from CN Rail. After all, the volume of grain that they typically shipped in producer cars loaded along branchline 43.03 in central Alberta was minimal compared with the massive tonnage that CN routinely retrieved from the high-throughput terminals just south of the mainline at Camrose. They were, at best, a nuisance, mere flies on the great ass of progress. As Matt Enright (2010, par. 1), a member of the group who farms near Rosalind, put it in his submission to Transport Canada’s 2010 Rail Freight Service Review, “the service we receive could at best be described as random ... I personally cannot remember one time when the train came on the day that CN first said it would.” Howard Vincett (2010, par. 1), a member of the group who farms near Galahad, pointed out in his submission that the costs of inconsistent service and delay – additional wages and equipment time, lost interest on crop sale proceeds, and opportunities lost to unanticipated waiting – are borne entirely by the farmers. As a critical piece of infrastructure, the railway created a space over which the company could exert a certain degree of control, and this meant that time was always on its side. In turn, its seemingly arbitrary hold on time – its ability to enforce randomness, unpredictability, and urgency – extended its power and influence over much of the space of the Prairies. Thus, as was often the case, these farmers had already been waiting several days for cars that had not

come when the call came from CN that the train was on its way. The day that the cars finally arrived, the forecast was bleak. The morning brought a brutal prairie wind that dropped temperatures to minus forty degrees. Conditions were not optimal for standing outside all day loading grain into hopper cars. The farmers called the CN operations desk to ask if they could have an extension on account of the unexpectedly harsh weather. CN's answer went something like this: "The engine will be there to haul those cars at eight o'clock tonight. Under no circumstances will there be a delay – if there is a single latch left open, those cars will sit there until April." And so, by 7:30 that night, the members of the Battle River Producer Car Group, fingers and faces frozen, had loaded sixty-four grain cars. CN's engine arrived to pull them away at two o'clock the next morning.

What happened that day? Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (2006, 152) have written that "the process of becoming a different economic subject is not an easy or a sudden one. It is not so much about seeing and knowing as it is about feeling and doing." What were the members of the Battle River Producer Car Group "feeling" (besides cold) and "doing" (besides shivering) on 24 January 2009? This chapter is an extended answer to that question. The events of that day serve as a punctuation mark in a broader story of social transformation in the Prairies, an incomplete story with a long history and an uncertain ending, a story of how struggles over and around technological change become key sites for the distribution of power and resources, for the formation of political subjectivity, and for the unfolding of social and economic possibility. Lately, we have become accustomed to rhetoric in which technology occupies a privileged position in accounts of social transformation, though typically those who take this line have in mind either digital networks or some sort of emerging biogenetic technology that is about to "change everything." Such accounts rarely, if ever, contemplate the politics of things such as grain-handling technology and railway branchlines – a symptom, perhaps, of the systematic forgetting of the rural that characterizes most contemporary discussions of technology and politics, with the possible exception of those that press for extension of the purported benefits of technological innovation to rural and remote areas. This chapter – a political economy of recent changes in prairie agriculture, primarily as told by those undergoing these changes – is motivated by a contrary impulse. It suggests not only that the story of the Battle River Railway illuminates the social implications of technological change in the grain-handling system in the Prairies but also that it can help us to understand the complex ways in which the politics of technology are central to

the organization and transformation of social life and its possibilities more generally.

Grain-Handling Technologies in the Prairies

Most Canadians are familiar with the iconic figure of the country grain elevator. Its primary technical function is (or, more accurately, was) to receive grain from farmers; to weigh, grade, and store that grain; and to load the grain into railcars bound for Pacific coast or Great Lakes terminals. In 1933, there were approximately 5,500 licensed country grain elevators in western Canada, most of them in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. A generous estimate might put the number of remaining country elevators in Canada at about 5 percent of the 5,500 or so that stood at the high point in 1933, somewhere between 250 and 300.¹ Literally thousands of elevators have been demolished in recent decades by the grain companies that own them, typically either preceded or followed closely by abandonment of adjacent branchlines. Of the country elevators that remain, a few are operational, some have been recuperated as local galleries, museums, and tourist attractions, some have been moved to farms (far away from rail lines) where they are used as storage facilities or simply preserved, and many stand in various states of ruin, awaiting the wrecker. In most cases, after the elevators and branchlines were shut down, much of the adjacent and associated economic and civic infrastructure could no longer be sustained due to lack of traffic and disappearance of the municipal tax revenue associated with the elevator and related operations. Like many country elevators across the Prairies, the towns in which they stood have either disappeared or stand empty (McDonnell 1998, 11).

A relatively new technology (the first was built around 1980) is now used to handle and store grain in the Prairies. These "high-throughput terminals" (or sometimes "inland terminals") are operated by an increasingly concentrated number of consolidated grain companies, highly integrated components of the massive agribusiness conglomerates that now dominate the prairie agricultural economy (firms such as Cargill, Viterra, and Pioneer-Richardson). A single high-throughput terminal can store many times the volume of grain that a country elevator can and can receive and ship grain simultaneously, in some cases loading over 100 railcars in a single shift (bins in a country elevator usually held from 50 to 2,000 tonnes of grain; a high-throughput can hold more than 40,000 tonnes). High-throughputs are technologically advanced facilities that feature automated operating and accounting systems as well as just-in-time coordination of input and output

with major, transnational supply and shipping networks. Designed to serve a radius of at least 100 kilometres, and to accommodate transport and container technologies with much higher capacities than the small trucks that delivered grain to country elevators, high-throughputs are typically located beyond municipal boundaries, where land prices and taxation levels are more favourable than those in town. Prairie town sites are rarely able to accommodate the spatial demands on which the high-throughput system's claims to efficiency depend: huge driveways for tractor-trailers; adjacency to a railway mainline with room for 100-car rail spots; and, especially, proximity to a major highway.

High-throughput terminals and rail-line abandonment have been crucial technological enablers of the centralization and consolidation of grain handling in the Prairies. The Canadian Wheat Board (2010, 7) reports that in 2009 there were 135.5 million total acres farmed across the three prairie provinces, up from 59.7 million acres in the mid-1930s. Over the same period, the number of farms decreased from 288,403 to 112,814, and the number of licensed primary elevators dropped from 5,498 to just 341, the vast majority of which are high-throughput or inland terminals. The average distance over which grain is hauled to an elevator rose from about 14 kilometres to over 60 kilometres. Since the mid-1970s, over 9,300 kilometres (5,820 miles) of railway branchline have been discontinued or abandoned across the Prairies.² Combined, the result is fewer farms (and fewer farmers) cultivating more land and hauling their grain greater distances to fewer, more centralized elevators located on railway mainlines. These dynamics are consistent with broader trends in the industrialization of farming in North America, a process that a recent synthesis of eight decades of social science research has confirmed consistently produces adverse socio-economic, political, and environmental impacts on rural communities (Lobao and Stofferahn 2008).

This particular transformation of prairie communities is still unfolding, but those closely affected by it have no trouble understanding its trajectory. Lisa Eshpeter (personal interview, 5 March 2010), a young woman who grew up on her family's farm near Daysland, Alberta, went off to university and now works on behalf of the effort to recuperate the Battle River branchline, clearly expressed the stakes to me:

If we were to continue to go along the path of allowing the multinationals to determine how everything were to be marketed and how much things cost, you would lose every individual owner, and you would end up just having workers and employees of these companies come out and do the actual

work. There would be no residents of these communities. There would be no need to have a community. One of the larger implications is that we would lose the culture of the Prairies but also the actual physical infrastructure of all these communities that would no longer be relevant because there would be no need for them.

Earlier in the day, her father, Ken Eshpeter (personal interview, 5 March 2010), was somewhat blunter: "If you were charged with the responsibility of helping to kill the rural at as fast a pace as you could, what's one of the first things you would do? You'd get rid of all the infrastructure, and part of the infrastructure is trains."

Producer Cars and the Battle River Branchline

Standing atop a hopper car as he fills it with number one hard red wheat at the country elevator in Forestburg, John Oberg (personal interview, 5 March 2010) told me that "it feels a bit like we are back in the 1920s." I took him to mean both that, as in the time before the wheat pools, single-desk marketing, and the regulation of rail service and grain elevation, the liberalization of the grain economy in recent years has left small producers vulnerable to railway and grain company oligopolies and that these producers now find themselves having to fight battles that had been presumed won decades ago. Interestingly, some of the earliest struggles by farmers against the collusive practices of the railways and grain companies were waged on behalf of branchline service and the right of producers to load their grain directly into rail cars. In the old days, railways and private grain companies benefited mutually from arrangements by which grain was collected exclusively from centralized elevators. In one of the earliest collective victories by a prairie farmers' organization, in 1903 the fledgling Territorial Grain Growers' Association successfully brought an action against the CPR – the *Sinatula* case – for violating provisions of the Manitoba Grain Act (1900) that required delivery of empty cars directly to producers who wanted to load them on their own rather than elevate their grain with the private companies whose practices had become abusive (Wilson 1978, 35-36). The rights won in this case, later enshrined in the Canada Grains Act (1912), and the organizations that arose to exploit them (the Grain Growers' Grain Company, Saskatchewan Cooperative Elevator, the United Grain Growers, and, later, the Saskatchewan and Alberta Wheat Pools) were foundational to the system of cooperative and producer-controlled grain handling that prevailed in the Prairies for most of the twentieth century. Similarly, agitation on behalf of

branchline extension and maintenance stretches back to the 1880s, when the Farmers' Protective Union in Manitoba pressed for improved service from the CPR (Friesen 1987, 213). With the wheat pools gone, country elevators all but disappeared, branchline service abandoned across the countryside, freight service regulation in retreat, grain handling consolidated in the hands of six massive corporations, and even the Canadian Wheat Board under siege, it is no wonder that "progress" leaves producers such as John Oberg (personal interview, ³ March 2010) feeling as though the clock has started to run backward. "We are," he observed, "reinventing the wheel."

Branchline 43.03, operated until recently by CN Rail, runs for ninety kilometres south from Camrose through the communities of Kelsey (population 14), Rosalind (190), Heisler (153), Forestburg (895), and Galahad (134), to its terminus at Alliance (158). With the closure (mostly in the 1990s) of the country elevators in these towns (two remain standing: one at Alliance, owned by Viterra and not operated as a primary elevator, the other at Forestburg, whose fate is discussed below), area producers were left to bear the additional costs of hauling grain to either the Cargill or the Pioneer-Richardson high-throughput terminal near the junction of the branchline and the CN mainline at Camrose or, less likely, to the independent Great Northern Grain terminal on the CPR mainline at Killam. These costs include increased fuel for repeated long-distance hauls, purchasing or contracting of Super B tractor-trailers able to carry volumes sizable enough to make long-distance hauling economically feasible, maintenance charges for these vehicles, farm road upgrades, and increased elevation charges due to lack of competition. As in other areas, these conditions have contributed to farm consolidation as small producers unable to absorb escalating costs sell out to larger operations seeking to achieve economies of scale at which long-distance hauling can be sustained. For remaining small producers, options have been few. Among them has been producer car loading, whereby farmers – taking advantage of century-old provisions added to the Canada Grain Act after the *Sinatula* case – order hopper cars directly from the Canadian Grain Commission, which in turn orders the railway companies to deliver them to loading sites.³ There producers proceed to fill the cars with grain, either directly from their trucks using an auger or from a track-side storage bin. The grain is then hauled directly to a terminal position at the coast, where it is weighed and graded by the commission, entirely bypassing elevation and mediation by the grain companies. In 2008-9, 2,800 Canadian farmers loaded a record 12,447 producer cars with Canadian Wheat Board grains (Canadian Wheat Board 2010).⁴

The Battle River Producer Car Group was established as a non-profit organization in 2003 to organize and support producer car loading along branchline 43.03. The group has approximately 200 members, almost all single proprietor owner-operators whose farms range in size from 1,000 to 7,500 acres. The group operates small loading facilities at six communities on the line, typically at spots where country elevators once stood, where cars are loaded directly from trucks or small, hopper-bottomed, trackside bins. In addition, the group now operates a country elevator at Forestburg. The elevator was purchased in 2008 by Prairie Hall Farms, whose proprietors are directors of the group, for \$45,000 from Viterra. The story of this sale is instructive. Viterra was very reluctant to sell the Forestburg elevator. The company's intention was to demolish it (typically, grain companies refuse even to sell the used equipment from a defunct elevator), ideally with as little notice as possible. However, because most country elevators stand *within* town limits, demolition requires a permit from town authorities. In this case, the Battle River Group learned from a sympathetic local official that Viterra had applied for a permit to demolish the elevator at Forestburg. Working persistently, the group and its supporters persuaded Viterra to sell the elevator to local interests on the (probably unenforceable) condition that the elevator would not be used to store or move grain for commercial purposes. The purchasers speculated that they might turn the elevator into a museum or gallery. Within a few weeks of taking possession, the group commenced shipping grain from the elevator.

Since 2002, the Battle River Producer Car Group has loaded over 3,100 railcars, with a current annual volume of about 600 cars. Clearly, most of the farmers who opt to ship their grain by producer cars, including those of the Battle River group, are motivated by individual economic benefit. They include avoiding elevation charges that typically run from eleven to fourteen dollars per tonne, thus saving roughly \$800 to \$1,200 for every railcar that a producer loads. Added to this saving are considerable savings on costs – the purchase and maintenance of tractor-trailers, fuel costs, time waiting in line, contracts with commercial truckers at about seven dollars per tonne (or roughly \$20,000 for 100,000 bushels of wheat) – associated with hauling grain long distances to a high-throughput terminal. Producers with whom I have spoken also consistently report more favourable grades, better protein counts, and dockage reductions for grain shipped by producer cars directly to port terminals (where the grain is graded by the Canadian Grain Commission) than the grades and dockage assessments that they receive from the grain companies operating the inland terminals. This results in both

higher revenues and reduced costs for grain cleaning. At a time when farm input costs continue to escalate, and farmers bear considerable additional freight costs due to the elimination of the Crow rate and subsidy, such savings can make the difference between a viable operation and a defunct one.

However, it is also clear that there is more at stake in the producer car option than simply individual economic advantage. Producer car shippers consistently characterize their choice as an attempt to resist the concentration and consolidation of the grain industry, by which small producers have systematically been disadvantaged and in relation to which they have had little voice. To these farmers, the right and choice to ship producer cars represent a recovery of some of the agency that they have lost in this transition. When asked why he is committed to producer car loading, Dennis Freadrich (personal interview, 3 March 2010) responded that

There's a centralization that's been happening in the grain industry for a number of years, and this is just a reaction to that centralization ... We got kind of pushed into it when they shut down all the elevators on the line. And then we just said as a group 'no, we don't have to do that, we have other options,' and we exercised them.

Furthermore, producer car shippers appear to appreciate that cooperation and solidarity are essential conditions for recuperating some measure of control over the conditions under which they pursue their livelihoods. "What I've found with this group," Howard Vincett (personal interview, 3 March 2010) told me,

is that it's brought a lot of the farmers closer together, whereas, if you're hauling to the big elevator, you're just kind of doing your own thing, and you're running your own business, and piss on the neighbours. It's kind of made more of a sense of community in the area again, and let the farmers work together again, instead of against each other.

Interestingly, the experience of producer car loading itself is conducive to encouraging this sort of solidarity, in a manner that recalls the role that country elevators once played as the media of cooperative socialization. According to farmer Gerald Kuefler (personal interview, 4 March 2010),

Today, when we're loading cars here at Galahad, at dinner time everybody quits. We step across the tracks and across the boulevard, and we all go over

to the local hotel for lunch, and she plans lunch for us. And we all sit down, have lunch, coffee, and then go back to work. It's a social gathering for us – we didn't do that before when we were at sitting [in line at the terminal] in Killam. Here we know everybody, everybody stops, and we go in, and it's "how are things going?" and tell a few jokes, have a little fun. It becomes a social thing ... In producer car loading, we are re-creating that whole [dynamic] where everybody would meet at the elevator, discuss grain. You'd go around, you'd talk. [The elevator was] sort of a focal point where you could get around. Guys got around, they visited and discussed what they are doing and what was going on, and we're re-creating that.

Although cooperative producer car loading seems to recover some of the social experience that nurtured solidarity at old country elevator sites, it would be a mistake to characterize the contemporary practice as simply nostalgic. Instead, it reflects an implicit understanding that cooperation is crucial to the survival of independent producers under conditions that otherwise are not favourable to them and that certain modes and scales of productive organization are more supportive of cooperative subjectivity than others. It is about the future, not the past: "It's kind of controlling our destiny in a lot of ways. If we didn't all get together, we would lose that control. This way we've got some control, and we can have an input in the direction that things are going to go in twenty or thirty years from now" (Freadrich, personal interview, 3 March 2010).

Not surprisingly, the railway and major grain companies are not big fans of producer cars. In 2001, the Western Grain Elevators Association (WGEA), representing the major grain companies, argued before the Canadian Grain Commission that producer car loading facilities and groups should be subjected to the same licensing conditions as primary elevators (Beingsner 2002). The WGEA argued that exemption gave producer car groups an unfair advantage over the major companies and undermined the latter's investment in developing the system of high-throughput terminals for the benefit of all farmers, suggesting that regulation could be used to limit the number of producer cars shipped in a given year. Notwithstanding these predatory claims, the commission decided to exempt producer car groups from licensing requirements provided that they would refrain from acting like grain companies (i.e., as long as they continue merely to coordinate shipping rather than *buying* grain from producers) (Grain News 2002). Similarly, from the perspective of the major railways, producer car shipping represents the return of precisely the "inefficiency" that they had hoped to eliminate through

branchline abandonment and country elevator closures. Despite continued support for producer car shipping by Transport Canada, the Canadian Wheat Board, and the Canadian Grain Commission, in 2006 CN Rail initiated a policy whereby it would allow advance booking only for units of 100 cars or more, slated for a single destination, and ordered for forty-two consecutive weeks, a policy that effectively would have eliminated producer car shipping by limiting delivery to high-throughput terminals with 100 car spots and sufficient stored volume to maintain continuous shipping. A group of small grain companies and an array of producers' associations (including the Battle River group) immediately brought an action against CN, and in 2008 the Canadian Transportation Agency found the policy to be in violation of the company's service obligations and ordered the railway to resume delivering producer cars. More recently, in September 2009, CN announced plans to "delist" fifty-three producer car loading sites at sidings across the Prairies.⁵ The move elicited considerable protest from producer organizations, prompting the federal government to intervene, persuading CN to delay the delisting, pending consultation with farmers under way as part of Transport Canada's 2010 Rail Freight Service Review. According to Gerry Ritz, the minister of agriculture and agrifood, "farmers have always had the choice to load their crops onto [a] train via an elevator, or via a producer car loading site. Our Government is committed to maintaining that choice." The review's interim report, issued in October 2010, was conspicuously non-committal on the issue of producer car loading and suggested that the matter of branchline abandonment was beyond its mandate (Transport Canada 2010, 53-56). Whether the government will ultimately resist the railway companies' apparent desire to abandon producer cars remains to be seen.

Branchline 43.03 was not on CN's "delisting" block because, as the Battle River Producer Car Group learned via an advertisement in the 27 November 2008 edition of the *Camrose Canadian* newspaper, CN had elected to discontinue a seventy-five kilometre section of the line from Kiron to Alliance. CN would retain the fifteen kilometre stretch running from its mainline to the high-throughput terminal operated by Cargill just south of Camrose. Beyond that, the line running through the six communities where the Battle River Producer Car Group loads grain would be abandoned. The announcement was not entirely a surprise since the line had been on CN's discontinuance list for years, the railway having long claimed that producers were unable to generate volumes sufficient to allow the line to be operated profitably.⁶

The Canada Transportation Act (1996) obliges rail companies considering abandonment of grain-dependent branchlines to entertain reasonable expressions of interest from any local concern seeking to acquire the line. The Battle River Producer Car Group promptly filed a letter with CN indicating its interest in the line. After several months of assessment and negotiation, a purchase price of \$4.85 million was agreed upon. Faced with the prospect of a social transformation that would undermine their agency as producers, and likely entail the demise of their communities, the men and women of the Battle River Producer Car Group made a decision: they would buy and operate a shortline railway. It was at this point that the elements of an alternative social transformation began to emerge.

In many respects, the situation was not unique. There are ten shortline railways in Saskatchewan operating about 1,700 kilometres of track. All but one are operated by cooperative or community-based initiatives on grain-dependent branchlines slated for abandonment. Most of them persist on grain shipped by producer car groups. These groups have benefited from well-developed provincial policy supporting shortline railway acquisition and sustainability that includes grants for feasibility studies, interest-free capital loans, flexible payment schedules, assistance in negotiations with the railways, and grants for infrastructure upgrades and maintenance (Saskatchewan, Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure, 2009). Recently, a thirty-seven kilometre grain-dependent branchline slated for abandonment by CP Rail in southern Manitoba was purchased by the Boundary Trail Rail Company, becoming that province's first (mostly) producer-owned shortline railway (White 2009). This project also benefited from provincial support in the form of a \$615,000 forgivable loan as well as a substantial investment from a local philanthropist. Significantly, the Boundary Trail shortline is to be operated on contract by a third party, Central Canadian Railway (Beingessner 2009a). In Alberta, an outfit called Alberta Prairie Railway Excursions received \$2.6 million in funding from Western Economic Diversification Canada to lay rails for a tourist steam train – complete with re-enacted train robberies and rescues by Métis hero Gabriel Dumont – from Stettler to Big Valley, along with an additional \$732,000 from the agency's Community Adjustment Fund to build parks adjacent to the line (Cowley 2010). In contrast to these ventures, the Battle River Producer Car Group was setting out to establish Alberta's first producer-owned-and-operated, cooperative, grain-dependant, shortline railway, in a province where no policy framework existed for such a venture, where they could

expect minimal government support, and where philanthropic largesse was nowhere to be seen on the horizon.⁷

Under these conditions, the Battle River producers pursued the only line of action available to them: they assumed the burden of organization. Petitions were drafted, circulated, and signed. Meetings were held in community halls. Letters were written to newspapers. Most importantly, visits were made to farmhouse kitchens, barns, coffee shops, and curling arenas around the countryside, visits where people looked each other in the eye. Volunteers were recruited to sell shares in a cooperative that would finance purchase of the branchline, volunteers such as Paul Schorak (personal interview, 4 March 2010), born and raised in Forestburg, a retired supervisor with the Alberta Liquor Control Board whose second career as political activist has seen him occupy elected office and work for several political parties. As he told me, “we have six towns that are along this branchline ... six communities that are mainly there because of the railroad being here. And communities develop that are meaningful communities. Once the railroad is gone, it’s just a matter of time and they’ll be gone too.” While retaining the economic benefits of producer car shipping – both the direct benefits to those who load cars and the indirect benefits of maintaining a competitive alternative to the high-throughput terminals – was central to the pitch for share sales, clearly something bigger was also on the table. As Ken Eshpeter (telephone interview, 11 June 2010), a key member of the leadership group, confided to me, it would have been far easier simply to form a corporation of private investors, but it would not suffice to “tie people to the enterprise.” The commitment to establish the railway as a cooperative was central to the motivation of the project from the outset, as was the sense that the venture’s success or failure extended beyond a competitive alternative for producers to encompass the very sustainability of rural communities. Indeed, at a certain point, the immediate economic benefit to producer car shippers became secondary. “That’s a big deal for us,” Eshpeter (personal interview, 5 March 2010) admitted, “but we’re a community. So what if we’re saving a couple dollars with grain and the whole community has died, if all the beautiful little towns along the line have died? Small accomplishment, really.” It might even be that organization as a cooperative, community-based venture is a necessary condition of success for shortline railways in the Prairies. As the major rail companies have insisted, profitability is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve on these low-volume lines. This, however, does not rule out the possibility of sustaining the lines on a break-even basis for other reasons altogether. As Paul Beingessner (2009b, par. 6) points out,

"Saskatchewan's successful shortlines are all community based. None are seen as investment vehicles. All are rather a means to an end – the end being the continuation of rail service for the benefit of the farmers and communities involved." This recipe appears to bode well for the future of branchline 43.03. In the end, volunteers raised nearly \$3.5 million through share sales, the bulk of them to individual producer car shippers, a significant number to local business and community organizations, a few to the municipalities, and nearly 200 to "people who want to hear the whistle blow" (Ken Eshpeter, personal interview, 5 March 2010).⁸ The cooperative took possession of the line on 18 June 2010, and the Battle River Railway was born. A locomotive was purchased, a local man (a retired CN engineer) was hired to run it, and farmers were certified to conduct the trains safely. On 14 December 2010, they pulled fifty cars loaded with barley to the junction at Camrose.

"No Way to Run a Railroad"?

In his groundbreaking essay "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" Langdon Winner describes how large-scale technological systems seem to enforce centralization of control and authority as a sort of moral imperative necessitated by the demands of technical and economic efficiency. Although more decentralized and democratic arrangements for managing our technologies and economies remain possible, the culture of contemporary technological capitalism often succeeds in casting these alternatives as prohibitively impractical. "It is a characteristic of societies based on large, complex technological systems," Winner (1986, 36) writes, "that moral reasons other than those of practical necessity appear increasingly obsolete, idealistic, and irrelevant. Whatever claims one may wish to make on behalf of liberty, justice or equality can be immediately neutralized when confronted with arguments to the effect, *'Fine, but that's no way to run a railroad.'*"

This is an argument that the men and women of the Battle River Railway simply refused to accept, and it is in this refusal and the affirmation that it implies ("Yes, actually, this is the way to run a railroad!") that the real possibility of social transformation in rural Alberta lies. What these producers have refused is a technological situation in which they have been reduced to objects, and what they have affirmed is the possibility of their own subjectivity, their own capacity to act into the future rather than simply to be acted on. At the high-throughput terminals, they are merely inputs, objects to be manipulated, on a screen, in the service of systemic interests over which they have little influence and no control; at the producer car loading sites along the Battle River branchline, and in their struggle to sustain the line

and the communities that rely on it, they are subjects reclaiming the ability to make their economy rather than being made victims of it. Reg Enright (personal interview, 3 March 2010) calls it “growing a backbone”:

There’s really an attitude out in the rural now that people are willing to see things go because ‘aw, shucks, everything else is gone, and we’re not putting up another fight’ ... You just get worn down after a while. Your elevators go, your churches go, your businesses go, your school goes. But this group, this one, we’re not going to let go.

These farmers realize what has been gained here:

I think one of the biggest things that we’ve learnt by doing this is we’ve learnt the power of cooperation among everybody. Individually, we could not have done this. If we didn’t think cooperatively to pull this thing off, this line would be long gone. And now we know that, if we cooperate and get a common view, we can actually have real power, we can actually do things and change things and make things happen. That’s one of the most rewarding things about being part of this, the fact that it shows us what we can do if we get everybody together and think on the same page. (Freadrich, personal interview, 3 March 2010)

In this regard, they are exemplars of what Gibson and Graham (2006, 111) have named the “post-capitalist politics” of the “intentional community economy,” in which “the Economy” as an unassailable structural force to which we can only adapt is destabilized and revealed as a contingent space of political judgment and action. In a context in which technology tends to close down the economy as a space of politics, the struggle of the Battle River producers “opens up the economy as a field of responsibility and decision” (103). They are social scientists talking. This is a young farmer:

Farmers are starting to feel their power in the area, that if we push something we can actually do it, rather than just letting the system play out or letting the big corporations and government dictate the rules of the game. Our opinion does matter. We have not had great success in evoking any change, but at least for us to speak up and to have our voices heard is a change, in and of itself, whether or not anyone’s listening. (Matt Enright, personal interview, 3 March 2010)

All genuinely political moments are moments of beginning, and to begin takes courage. French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2010, viii) has written that we live in consensual times, with consensus referring not to agreement between people but to resignation to the sense that “what is, is all there is.” He contrasts this with another way of being in the world, a way of being that “lays claim to one present against another and affirms that the visible, thinkable and possible can be described in many ways. This other way has a name. It is called politics” (x). He goes on to write that “politics is the way of concerning oneself with human affairs based on the mad presupposition that anyone is as intelligent as anyone else and that at least one more thing can always be done other than what is being done” (2). Becoming political means refusing to take the present state of things as simply given. It means refusing to accept the consensus that what there is is all there is and that nothing can be done. It means, as Rancière puts it, claiming “the right to attend to the future” (3). Or, in the words of Matt Enright (personal interview, 3 March 2010), spoken at his kitchen table in Rosalind, it means allowing oneself “to actually do something rather than just going with the flow.” Confronted with the consensus that a technological “rationalization” of the grain-handling system – disappearance of the country elevators, abandonment of railway branchlines, and evacuation of prairie communities – was the only future available to them, the Battle River producers and their supporters simply refused and got down to work. In this refusal, they made a beginning that expressed the courage typical of generations of prairie citizen-producers before them (Epp 2008, 73-94). They became political. As Roger Epp has described them, these citizen-producers “defy all of those caricatures through which the rural is now most likely to be encountered. They know that what is at stake in the countryside touches on the most basic questions of our time, questions about the future of technology, work, food, the environment and democracy” (8). That the future is unwritten is a condition of politics, and courage in the face of this uncertainty is what distinguishes politics from mere government and technology. Branchline 43.03 runs south from Camrose and terminates at Alliance. Where the Battle River Railway will lead is an open question.

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Canada and the Canada Research Chairs program. I am indebted also to the late Paul Beingsner for his advice and encouragement in the early stages of this project. Farmer, shortline railroader, activist, and organic intellectual, Paul died in a haybinning accident on his farm near Truax, Saskatchewan, on 25 June 2009. This article is dedicated to his memory.

NOTES

- 1 To my knowledge, there is no definitive inventory of remaining country elevators in Canada. The Canadian Grain Commission keeps annual records of licensed primary elevators in Canada but does not distinguish between country elevators and high-throughput terminals.
- 2 These figures were provided to me in August 2010 by the Engineering and Rail Complaints Division of the Canadian Transportation Agency.
- 3 The 1998 final report of Transport Canada's *Grain-Handling and Transportation Review* (Estey 1998) recommended that the right to ship producer cars be retained in law, as it has been in subsequent statutory amendments reflecting the report.
- 4 The Canada Grain Act authorizes the use of producer cars for both board (wheat, barley, oats) and non-board (e.g., canola, pulse) grains. However, requirements for sales agreements and terminal authorization prior to shipping – secured by the Wheat Board in the case of board grains but left to individual producers in the case of non-board grains – make producer car shipping of non-board grains relatively rare; individual producers moving small volumes are not able to secure sales agreements and terminal positions on their own. Nearly all non-board grain in Canada is elevated and shipped by the major grain companies.
- 5 “Delisting” simply means that, while the line would remain under the ownership of CN and might be used for other purposes, the carrier would no longer pull producer cars to or from the sidings. In contrast to discontinuance, which requires notice of three years, delisting requires only sixty days of notice.
- 6 This number appeared to fluctuate in response to the likelihood that producers might actually meet it. Initially, CN indicated that 800 cars per year would make the line profitable, but, just as it began to look as though producers might be nearing this volume, the figure changed to 1,200 cars.
- 7 The Battle River group received a \$45,000 grant from Alberta's Rural Community Adaptation program to formulate a business plan. Beyond that, the group has received no other direct government funding toward purchase of the line. Battle River–Wainwright MLA Doug Griffiths (personal interview, 5 March 2010) indicated that, while he supported the venture, in the absence of a policy framework – which itself demanded additional study of the sector – further provincial contributions could not be justified. The group did receive a \$5 million line of credit from the Alberta Financial Services Corporation, from which the group ultimately drew a loan of \$1.5 million. Later the group received grants from the Rural Alberta Development Fund (\$235,000) and the Canadian Cooperative Development Initiative (\$60,000) to develop a composite-grading program for blending grain.
- 8 The co-op sold approximately 450 B-class shares to producers at \$5,000 each, allocated at one share per car of anticipated loading. B-class shareholders were also eligible for A-class voting shares at \$1,000 each, of which 180 were sold. Seventy

D-class shares were sold to local business and community interests at \$10,000 apiece. Two hundred supportive individuals purchased C-class shares for \$1,000 each. One municipality purchased an E-class share for \$25,000. The remainder of the purchase price was drawn from the AFSC line of credit mentioned above.

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