

Sir William Van Horne

“If we can’t export the scenery, we’ll import the tourists.”

William Van Horne undertook the herculean task of building the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

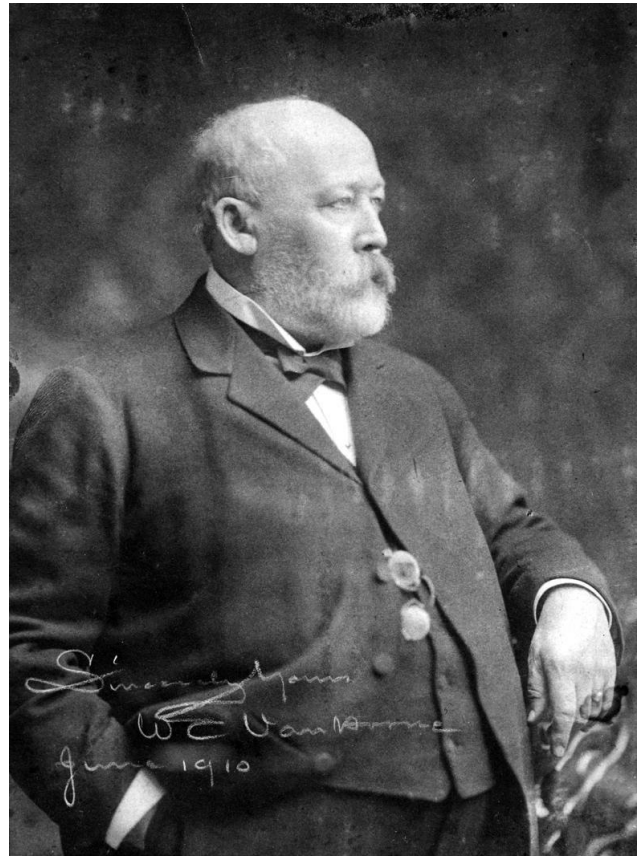
When it became clear the line construction would not meet its deadlines, the CPR knew it had to make track. They found an American who started his career as a telegraph delivery boy and worked his way up. He could decode messages just by listening to the telegraph’s clicks. William Van Horne understood railways.

He promised that he would complete the railway in half the time predicted (five years instead of ten). That seemed an impossible feat, but Van Horne, who could stay up half the night playing poker, gambled on himself. By August of 1883 the tracks reached Calgary, Alberta, two years after construction began.

Under Van Horne’s leadership, the building of hotels and resorts promoted tourism. Advertisements sold snow-capped peaks to artists in search of inspiration and visitors in search of adventure.

As large and cross-looking as a bear, a perpetual cigar in his mouth, Van Horne’s “demonic energy” not only raised Canada’s “national self-respect” but gambled that Alberta’s beauty would attract the world.

“From Telegrapher to Titan”



Sir William Cornelius Van Horne
Glenbow Archives NA-2077-1

Beside railway tracks that moved settlers and supplies west, telegraph lines crackled. Electric signals moved along the lines, carrying coded messages from one location to another. As a young boy in Illinois, William Van Horne earned money by delivering telegraph messages. While he waited at the telegraph office for messages to arrive, he watched as the dots and dashes of Morse Code were punched onto strips of paper.

Van Horne became an expert telegrapher, able to decipher incoming messages by simply listening to the instrument's clicks and clacks.

Luxury on Rails

William Van Horne often supervised the construction of the CPR from his private railway car. As men, horses, rails, ties, spikes, and timber moved west across the country, leaving freshly hammered tracks behind them, Van Horne followed.

His private railway cars were luxurious. Leather upholstery, fine china and silk velvet met the high standards set by Van Horne, the general manager of the CPR.



Driving the Last Spike on the Canadian Pacific Railway,
Cragiellachie, British Columbia
Glenbow Archives NA-1494-5

Van Horne's personal tastes shaped the experiences of his future first-class customers. Their sleeping, dining, and parlour cars were built to his specifications, and travellers were advised to expect the best. "Our sleeping car is... larger and more luxurious. With its soft and rich cushions, silken curtains, thick carpets, delicate carvings, and beautiful decorations..."

Full Name: William Cornelius Van Horne
Born: February 3, 1843 – Died: September 11, 1915

Additional Resources

- **Dictionary of Canadian Biography**
http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/van_horne_william_cornelius_14E.html
- **The Canadian Encyclopedia**
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sir-william-cornelius-van-horne>



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