



Canadian National leads the way

Ken Goslett and Kevin J. Holland

It must be remembered that the diesel-powered locomotive had to be an economically sound proposition in order to gain acceptance by the railways. Development work had continued on the steam locomotive as well. Being essentially conservative enterprises, the railways were reluctant to abandon a technology such as steam that had served them well and continued to do so.

A profitable visit to Europe

In the latter part of 1923, CNR Superintendent of Motive Power Charles Edward “Ned” Brooks embarked on a tour of European railways, accompanied by R.J. Needham, CNR Central Region electrical engineer, and E.W. Oliver, manager of the CNR’s Toronto-area electric lines. The purpose of the trip was to inspect diesel-engine applications and assess their suitability for railway application in Canada. Little of practical value was encountered by the trio until, en route home from Sweden, they visited the works of William Beardmore & Co., Ltd., in Glasgow, Scotland. At the time, Beardmore specialized in lightweight “aero” diesel engines for use in aircraft and airships. One of these engines attracted Brooks’ interest; his belief that the design was light yet powerful enough for railway use was shared by

Beardmore management and staff, and plans to export examples to Canada were initiated.

Mr. Brooks, as we shall see shortly, was a man of remarkable foresight. Skilled and perceptive in technical matters, he was also a man of varied interests, as recalled by a CNR colleague:

“Ned Brooks was a most imaginative man with a great driving force. He was intolerant of inefficiency both among his own officers and locomotive crews but underneath he was an extremely kind and sensitive man. His hobby was growing hyacinths and during the winter and spring there was not a day he did not have several pots of these beautiful flowers which he had raised at his home. He was a keen golfer and was for several terms president of the Kanawaki Golf Club.”¹

Brooks’ belief in the suitability of the Beardmore engine was indeed correct and with it he catapulted Canadian National to the forefront of North American dieselization. The chief difficulty with the diesel engine as a railway prime mover had been its horsepower-to-weight ratio.

Charles Edward “Ned” Brooks (1886–1933), Canadian National’s chief of motive power and car equipment in the years immediately preceding his untimely death, was the central figure in CNR’s pioneering development of the internal-combustion engine for North American railcar and locomotive applications. In 1929, Brooks posed in the engineer’s cab of CNR No. 9000, developed under his direction and considered the first mainline diesel-electric locomotive in North American service.

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