



History of the Edson Caboose

A Brief Look at 77704

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General Information on the History of the Caboose

The first railroad started in Canada just outside of Montreal in 1836. As the railway further developed across Canada, many of the railroaders were concerned with the safety of riding aboard the top of the trains while performing their various tasks, such as switching the brakes.¹ It was not until the 1840s that a conductor named from New York, Nat William, decided to use an empty wooden boxcar at the end of his train to create a 'rolling office'.² He used the space to store his flags, lanterns, chains, and other work tools. This decision ultimately created the first caboose and a railroad tradition that would last 140 years.³

The caboose was generally accepted by the late 1870s in Canada. The first crew car (one of the original names for cabooses) was put into place by the Great Western Railway Company in Ontario. The crew cars could weigh as much as ten tons and housed the conductor, flagmen and brakemen.⁴ With the popularity of the caboose growing, many railway companies opted to convert old four-wheeled boxcars into British-style brake vans. These rolling stocks had a large brake wheel in the middle of the floor which worked as a drag for the rest of the train when they needed to stop⁵.

Many names have been given to the caboose, including cabin, crummy, buggy, doghouse, waycar, shack, and hack.⁶ There are varying versions of how the caboose got its name and what year the term was first used. One story says it comes from the Dutch word *kabuis*, meaning little room or hut. These huts were used on the deck of a ship so sailors would not have to smell the stench of the slaves and food from below.⁷ The English word *caboose* was first used to describe the galley on a ship⁸.

One of the most iconic features of the caboose is the cupola that juts out from the top of the roof. The invention of the cupola is credited to T.B. Watson, who conducted for Chicago and North Western Railways. In 1863, when Watson's regular caboose was reassigned, he used a wood boxcar that had a hole in the roof. Watson then sat on a stack of boxes so that his shoulders and head were sticking over the top of the boxcar. This allowed him a clear line of vision of what was coming up

¹ Tom Murray, *Rails Across Canada: The History of Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railways*, (Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 2011), 57.

² John Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose," *Trains Magazine Online* (trc.trains.com), May 1, 2006, http://trn.trains.com/sitecore/content/Home/Railroad%20Reference/Railroad%20History/2006/05/The%20colorful%20caboose.aspx?sc_lang=en

³ Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

⁴ Omer Lavallee, "A Few Facts on the History of the Caboose," *CP Rail News*, February 1988, <http://cnlines.ca/CNcyclopedia/van/new.php> (accessed June 2, 2014).

⁵ Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

⁶ Lavallee, "A Few Facts on the History of the Caboose."

⁷ Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

⁸ Lavallee, "A Few Facts on the History of the Caboose."

ahead. Upon arrival at his destination, he informed the railway mechanic that a crow's nest should be built in every caboose.

The main purpose of a cupola was to give the rear trainmen a view of the train while it was in motion.⁹

The caboose served a wide variety of purposes. Besides providing housing for the trainmen while they looked for overheated wheel journals or hotboxes, dragged equipment, and shifted freight loads, the conductor also used this space to check car waybills, wheel reports, switchlists and manage the train's operation.¹⁰ The cabooses would also hold bunks for sleeping, cooking stoves, toilets, and stored the tools and supplies needed by the crew – including coupler knuckles and pins, chains, jacks, and re-railing frogs.¹¹

Although a caboose could have had many luxuries inside, they also had their fair share of dangers. Due to its location at the back of the train, it was prone to large jolts. This was caused by the slack which occurred whenever the train stopped and started rippling back to the caboose. The jolt would at times send men flying into walls, causing injury. Toppled lanterns, derailments, or rear end collisions were other threats to the caboose. The only security feature inside was a handrail located down the middle of the caboose for men to grab on to in case of emergency.¹² Steel cabooses were put into production after the First World War, which helped with the safety of the trainmen in the event of a rear end collision.¹³

As the caboose became a more standardized feature of the railway, they started to become specialized. There were three main kinds of cabooses. A standard, or cupola, caboose had a small turret raised above the roof so the crew could look out over the length of the train, and this was the most popular version. A bay window caboose had a window located on each side of the caboose which pushed out over the side car. These were used in the mountains when cupola cabooses were too tall to make it through the tunnels. Finally, a transfer caboose was a simple flat car that had a bow bolted on to the top. It was only used in and around the rail yards, and did not have any of the living facilities associated with the bay window or cupola cabooses.¹⁴

Cabooses were required by law in Canada until the 1980s, when new technologies allowed trains to be electronically monitored. These devices could monitor separating cars and could apply the brakes, so train crews would now ride in the locomotive instead of the caboose.¹⁵ The first caboose-less train ran in 1989 by CP. The caboose-less train idea was thought of years prior, but was surrounded by controversy, as many railroaders thought that it was not as safe and would eliminate jobs.¹⁶

⁹ Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

¹⁰ Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

¹¹ Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

¹² Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

¹³ Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

¹⁴ Kelly, "The Colourful Caboose."

¹⁵ Janet Felstad, interview by Scott Dibble, CBC Radio News "Railways Reduce Caboose Use," Record, November 14, 1988, September 9, 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/science-technology/transportation/general-1/railways-reduce-caboose-use.html>.

¹⁶ Felstad, "Railways Reduce Caboose Use."

Over the years, the Canadian National Railway owned nearly 2920 wooden cabooses, excluding the ones from the subsidiaries Grand Trunk Western, Central Vermont, and Grand Trunk New England. This number dropped to sixteen by 1988, out of the total 1710 cabooses still in service.¹⁷ Canadian National officially dropped their use of cabooses in February of 1990 in exchange for an electronic device that does the same work of a conductor and the trainmen in the caboose.¹⁸

¹⁷ Lavalley, "A Few Facts on the History of the Caboose."

¹⁸ Felstad, "Railways Reduce Caboose Use."

History of the 77704

The Edson and District Historical Society's artefact 1974.001.001 is one of the oldest artefacts of Canadian National history on display in Canada.¹⁹ It is, however, not the oldest caboose on display - there are currently five pre-1900 cabooses located throughout the country.²⁰ The caboose was the first artefact donated to the Edson and District Historical Society in August of 1974 by Canadian National. It was also outfitted with all of the necessary tools and equipment for a caboose in 1923.²¹

The caboose was built in December 1907 by the Canadian Car Company, which specialized in rolling stock. It became part of the Grand Trunk Pacific's first caboose order. Twenty cars were made in this series - 390000 through 390019. Artefact 1974.001.001 was originally the Grand Trunk Pacific's 390016. Canadian National took ownership of the caboose in 1917. Only sixteen of the original twenty car orders made it onto the Canadian National Roster. It was renumbered as the 77704 at Melville, Saskatchewan on April 19, 1924, along with the fifteen other wooden cabooses that occupied the 77962-77707 Canadian National group.²²

It is most likely that the caboose's entire career was on the Western Region of the tracks, but it was assigned to various conductors and terminals. Cabooses typically went to a new owner every five to ten years.²³

The caboose was moved by Canadian National to Edson's RCMP Centennial Park in 1974. At the same time the caboose was moved, trees from the Canadian National Railway's superintendent's house in town were also moved and replanted in the park. Some of the trees currently in the park may be from that planting in 1974.²⁴

¹⁹ Gisela Hippolt-Squair, "Restoration of Caboose - 1999" (presented at the restoration ceremony for the CN Caboose, Edson, Alberta, November 10, 1999).

²⁰ Lavalley, "A Few Facts on the History of the Caboose."

²¹ Hippolt-Squair, "Restoration of Caboose."

²² Hippolt-Squair, "Restoration of Caboose."

²³ Hippolt-Squair, "Restoration of Caboose."

²⁴ Edson Leader, ("Caboose Caption" 1974).

Restoration Information on the 77704

The caboose was restored in 1999 courtesy of a \$5,000 grant from Canadian National Railways. The town of Edson contributed funds to pay the remaining costs, which was another \$4,825. The restoration included repairing the end beams, replacing all exterior wood siding with cedar, painting the exterior as per CN colours, and re-leveling the caboose.²⁵

Since that restoration, the interior of the caboose has been badly vandalized, including graffiti and broken interior components. The roof of the caboose was in poor condition, which resulted in water damage to the interior. In 2013 the Town of Edson made some repairs on the 77704 caboose. New ¾ inch plywood was installed on the caboose roof. A further layer of ½ inch plywood was installed in the opposite direction for strength and durability, and ‘torched-on’ roofing, complete with ice & snow block which is guaranteed for 20 years, was installed over the plywood.

At the June 2014 Edson & District Historical Society Annual General Meeting, the membership voted to restore the exterior colour of the 77704 to the CN paint job from August 7, 1960 - Orange No. 10 ends, sides and cupola, Red No. 11 steps, roof, trucks and tool box. Grey No. 11 handrails. CNR green maple leaf logo.

Chuck's Painting and Drywall painted the exterior of the caboose to the above specifications in the summer of 2018 and were requested to repaint the west side of the caboose in 2019 due to fading.

The Leaman Exchange completed the stenciling of the CNR logo and lettering in 2018, but will redo the stencil on the west side of the caboose in the summer of 2020.

²⁵ Hippolt-Squair, “Restoration of Caboose.”

Caboose Specifications

It is important to note that Canadian National did not have a central paint distributor for its rolling stock and engines. With this being said, colours could vary from town to town based on a particular paint distributor's interpretation of a paint colour. The colours listed here are approximate pantone matches from original CN paint chips.

- Mineral Brown-181C
- Morency Orange-166C
- Black No. 10- Process Black C
- Grey No. 10-416C
- Grey No. 11- 417C
- Green No. 11- 5815C
- Original Green No. 12- 363C
- Green No. 12- 362C
- Semi-Gloss was typically used for the exterior of the cars, as it held up well but still hid some imperfections unlike gloss paint.²⁶
- The 1939 paint scheme only had 12 main colours in it. The M-40-D document for paint colour prior to the 1940s from Canadian national's archives has pages missing, as well as the wet samples of paint. This information is partial.²⁷
- Canadian National lettering was consistently twelve inches tall. Caboosees began to have the all-white maple leaf freight monogram applied to them around 1943. The earliest known caboose to have the emblem painted on was the 78565 on December 9, 1943 at Point, St. Charles in the – at the time - new Morency Orange scheme. The maple leaf monogram ultimately ceased to be used on revenue service freight cars within two years of its introduction.²⁸
- For the most part the under body, tool boxes and truck were painted mineral brown after 1940; the ends, sides, roof and cupolas in the early years were also mineral brown then went to morency orange with a mineral brown roof. Always, the handrails were white.²⁹
- Process Black C was used for the under carriage and wheels until the 1940s, when mineral brown was used underneath instead.³⁰
- The predominant colour was mineral brown, which became red No. 11 in 1954. This colour was used on cabooses prior to 1943. It was also referred to as freight car red or box car red.

²⁶Stafford Swain, "CNR Rolling Stock Monograms," *CN Lines Magazine*, 12, no. 3 (2004): 21-28, 21.

²⁷ Canadian National Railways Historical Association, "The CN Steel Cabooses," Liam Morland, <http://cnlines.ca/CNcyclopedia/van/new.php> (accessed June 2, 2014).

²⁸ Canadian National Railways, "The CN Steel Cabooses."

²⁹ Lavallee, "A Few Facts on the History of the Caboose."

³⁰Stafford Swain, "Freight Car Corner," *CN Lines Magazine*, 6, no. 1 (1993): 3-10, 6.

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