

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 8, 2007

**Steam Passenger Trains on the B & O:** In the early 1930s, taking my cousin Eleanor and me to school at 4th & West Streets in Wilmington, my father would often stop at Mac's Texaco filling station at Pennsylvania Avenue and Union Street, which was 50 yards from the overpass on the B & O Railroad's main line. As we were stopped, a morning passenger train headed south (or west as the B & O called it) would often be pulling away from Delaware Avenue Station with a 4-6-2 Pacific "President Class" locomotive on the front end. On the side of the cab would be lettered "President Washington" or whatever president it turned out to be, and it was great fun to see how many "Presidents" we could see in a certain period of time. I think there were 24 locomotives in this class, and they were numbered from 5300 up. In 1936, I went to Washington during spring vacation with Dave Creighton and the YMCA for a wonderful three days. We went down on the newly electrified Pennsylvania Railroad, with its brand new GG-1 locomotives pulling the passenger trains. Coming home, however, we rode the Royal Blue on the B & O, still pulled by a fast steam locomotive. The whole train, including the locomotive, was painted dark blue, and there was modest streamlining on the locomotive, which had been modified from one of the 24 "Presidents." There was a nifty (cool) buffet car on the train with a friendly black attendant in a white coat who served us cherry-vanilla ice cream behind a counter running the length of the car. "Nothing could be finer."

In 1950, I was a young travel agent, and steam was almost gone from the B & O. It was still eight years before passenger service was abandoned north (or east) of Baltimore, but except for a local train from Philadelphia to Washington in the morning and the same returning in late afternoon, all passenger trains were pulled by diesel locomotives. Clarence Miller was the city ticket agent for the B & O in Wilmington, and Matt Minker (father of the builder and Blue Rocks owner) was his assistant. I asked them if I could get a pass to ride the cab of the steam locomotive pulling these locals from Wilmington to Washington and back. Although Mr. Miller could not understand why I would want to ride these dirty old things, he arranged for the pass on Saturday, July 15, 1950. I was standing at the front of the platform at Delaware Avenue Station when the train from Philadelphia pulled in at 8:30, right on time. I climbed into the cab, handed my papers to the engineer, and he and the fireman welcomed me and told me where to stand out of their way. Just before they braked for the stop at Newark, the speedometer read 86 m.p.h. After Newark, our stops were Elk Mills, Aiken, Aberdeen, Mount Royal Station (Baltimore), Camden Station, Elk Ridge, Laurel, and Union Station in Washington. At the west end of the Susquehanna River bridge, there was a sharp curve, and I thought the locomotive was going to upset when we hit that curve at some speed, but apparently it was routine, as the other two in the cab paid no attention to it. A couple miles farther, the fireman climbed atop the coal pile in the tender and lowered a water scoop. We were passing over a water trough between the rails, probably a mile long. Water flew out to both sides all over the place (it was said that these scoops, devised to save time in taking on water, were not more than 50 percent efficient). The scoop seemed to retract on its own as we reached the end of the trough, and we soon stopped at Aberdeen. At Mount Royal Station in Baltimore, the engineer edged forward very slowly before making his final stop for passengers to get on or off. I soon realized he was lining up the cab window with a heavily worn stick projecting from the stone wall alongside; at this point the spout from a water tower near the track was exactly opposite the lid for the tender tank. After taking on water, we drifted through the mile-long Howard Street Tunnel to Camden Station. The rest of the trip to Washington was uneventful.

The one thing of especial interest on the return was the navigation through the Baltimore tunnels. At Camden Station, a small electric locomotive was coupled on ahead of the steam engine. This helper engine pulled the train up grade at slow speed through the long Howard Street Tunnel and into Mount Royal Station, but it did not cut off there. There were more short tunnels beyond Mount Royal, and it worked us through those as well. After these tunnels were cleared, and without stopping the train, the coupler pin was pulled, and the electric locomotive moved rapidly ahead of the steam engine (which was then moving the train at about 10 m.p.h.) and was switched off onto a side track, whereby the switch was returned to the mainline track, the engineer of the steam locomotive pulled back on the throttle lever, and the train lunged ahead with sharp staccato barks from the exhaust as it headed for Wilmington and Philadelphia.

About 1955, I was working after 5:30 in the travel office when I heard the sharp bark of a steam locomotive picking up speed. I looked at my watch and it *had* to be the Royal Blue climbing the grade toward Philadelphia from its Wilmington stop. It was 5:37, and the flagship train on the line, competing with the PRR's Congressional, was due at Wilmington at 5:32. The next day I told Clarence Miller there was a steam engine on the Royal Blue last night. He said that couldn't be, that they could never make the schedule. It may have been an emergency, and the very last time, but a great Pacific of the 5300 class was pulling the Royal Blue!