

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 1, 2015

**The Wilmington & Northern Railroad:** Since our Steamin' Day on June 7 is featuring railroads, it seems appropriate to have a local railroad story this week. Like many lines built soon after the Civil War, the Wilmington & Northern Railroad (W & N) was built from Wilmington to Reading, Pennsylvania, about 1870. Very little grading was done; the builders simply went around the hills for a total distance of 70 miles. Several horseshoe curves resulted, especially in the southern portion between Montchanin, Delaware, and Cossart, Pennsylvania, just south of Chadds Ford

For the most part, the rail line followed the Brandywine northward and then the west branch of this stream toward its headwaters. In northern Chester County and into Berks County, it crossed hilly country with several early iron mines before descending into the valley of the Schuylkill at Birdsboro and then following this major stream the remaining 10 miles to Reading. Faced with rate wars in the early 1870s, many railroads including the W & N (and the nearby Wilmington & Western through Yorklyn) were forced into bankruptcy. Colonel Henry A. du Pont of Winterthur, whose estate it passed, bought the line, and in true du Pont fashion, upgraded it and built some outstanding passenger stations of the period. Examples such as those at Montchanin and Winterthur in Delaware and Pocopson in Pennsylvania still stand.

The Reading Company, heavy in anthracite coal holdings to support its prosperous railroad mostly in eastern Pennsylvania, acquired the W & N before 1890, and Reading "Camelback" locomotives, a mainstay of the Reading for many years, were a fixture on the line. A Camelback was a steam locomotive with the engineer's cab located midway, front-to-back, alongside the boiler. The fireman was behind the firebox at the rear of the boiler, as was the case with most steam locomotives. Communication between the two was difficult, but the engineer did have a better view of the railroad ahead. As a young boy, I would marvel at one of these engines on a southbound mixed train blocking Kennett Pike at Greenville while freight was transferred at Shields' Lumber and Coal Company. Passenger service was profitable until about 1900, when hastily built electric trolley lines through the countryside siphoned off rail travelers. Freight business remained strong through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At Elsmere Junction just west of Wilmington, the W & N intersected the main line of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad; at Chadds Ford, it crossed the Philadelphia and Baltimore Central Branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad (later called the Octoraro Branch); at Coatesville it crossed the main east-west line of the PRR (although at different levels); at Suplee it crossed the Downingtown and Lancaster; and at Birdsboro the main Reading-Philadelphia line of the Reading Company. The early iron mines at Joanna, Isabella, and St. Peters and the steel mills at Coatesville created a very profitable operation.

After World War II, when historic railroad societies wanted to provide interesting trips over lines that no longer offered passenger service, the scenic W & N was a favorite. About 1953, when I was using my '14 Stanley Model 607, I followed a Sunday northbound excursion train that had originated in Philadelphia pulled by a shiny dark green Reading Pacific (4-6-2) as it wound its way around the several horseshoe curves of the W & N. Joe Collins, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy's representative in Philadelphia, was on board, and the next time he called at our travel agency, we found we had much in common.

In 1954, Joe Collins learned of another trip up the W & N to Reading, sponsored by a historic rail club from Baltimore. While most of the passengers originated in their home city and the trip began from either Camden or Mount Royal Station in Baltimore, prospects from Delaware were invited to join when the B & O train stopped at Newark. I had hoped a steam locomotive would be put on at Elsmere Junction, but it was not to be. Joe and I were joined by my cousin Norman Mancill and a second cousin once removed, Peter Marshall, as we boarded at Newark. We enjoyed the trip, and while I was familiar with the railroad south of Coatesville, the northern portion was new to me. The railroad skirted the hillside around three sides of Geigertown, which was at a lower elevation. We crossed the Schuylkill between Birdsboro and Reading and came to a stop at Franklin Street station. A sightseeing bus was provided to take us to the pagoda on top of Mount Penn with its breathtaking view on a clear and cold early spring day.

The Brandywine Valley Association, a watershed and conservation group founded in 1945, sponsored several annual "Brandywine Rail Rambles" in the late 1950s. These were never steam-powered. Sometimes the train was boarded at Greenville and sometimes at the Delaware Avenue Station of the B & O in Wilmington. Pownall Jones and I took the trip about 1959 when we boarded in Wilmington (B & O passenger service had been discontinued early in 1958, but the station platform was intact). Local historian, comedian, and storyteller Christian C. Sanderson of Chadds Ford was lecturing on the train as we passed the "great bend of the Brandywine" north of Granogue. The trip that day went up the W & N to Elverson and then proceeded over the seldom-used branch line to St. Peters Village at the Falls of the French Creek. On our return, the excursion train backed onto a siding that had just been built to service the new Grace Mine. On our return as we passed Modena, just south of Coatesville, steam locomotives were being scrapped by the dozens at the Luria Brothers scrap yard.

In 1960, the Reading Company realized the demand from rail buffs who wanted to ride excursion trains pulled by steam locomotives, and it started its Reading Rail Rambles, using many branch lines and some main lines of the railroad. Still in service were about four of the big 4-8-4 steam locomotives with 70" drivers that the Reading designated as "T-1." In April 1961, the first such ramble came from Reading down the W & N branch to Elsmere Junction. Southbound, the sold-out 12-car train was pulled by T-1 number 2124, and I took 16 mm. movies of the trip at seven locations along its route. On the horseshoe curve at Granogue, the train stopped for at least 15 minutes for the benefit of amateur photographers, blocking the Smith's Bridge Road crossing, but no one seemed to care. A sister locomotive, #2101, was headed north and awaited the train at Elsmere Junction for the return trip to Reading. A second Reading Rail Ramble came down the W & N in 1963.

The connection with the former Pennsy at Coatesville was eliminated many years ago, and the railroad was subsequently torn up between there and Birdsboro. The line south to Elsmere Junction with a connection at Chadds Ford with the former Octoraro Branch of the PRR is presently owned by the successors to Lukens Steel Company of Coatesville, and about 5 freight trains a week navigate portions of the scenic railroad.