

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 17, 2014

The Beginning of Tourist Railroads about 1960: Although the name “tourist railroad” did not surface until some years later, by the late 1950s, when steam power was mostly gone from the nation’s trunk lines, many lovers of steam all over the country thought how great it would be if little-used branch lines could be used for small passenger trains to be pulled by one of the thousands of steam locomotives then being scrapped. By the 1950s, Knott’s Berry Farm in California and Disneyland not far away both offered rides behind a steam locomotive around a newly built railway loop. A lot more were soon to come.

The problem with many branch lines was that they were connected to major railroads and therefore ICC regulations and union contracts prevailed. The 4½-mile Strasburg Railroad was an independent common carrier and first carried passengers behind a tiny gasoline-powered Plymouth locomotive in 1960, beginning steam operation the next year. W. Nelson Blount, owner of Ocean Spray Cranberry Co., finally negotiated a contract with the Boston & Maine Railroad to run a steam passenger operation from Keene to Walpole, New Hampshire, in 1962. This was the beginning of Steamtown, now in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and also the one that established a precedent that a tourist railroad run by volunteers could operate on the same track with a main line railroad’s commercial freight service. The Wanamaker & Kempton Railroad in Pennsylvania’s coal country was a private line not connected to the Reading System, so ICC and other sticking points did not affect it. For two or three years in the early 1960s, the Everett Railroad in Bedford County, Pennsylvania, operated steam for 2½ miles on an abandoned rail line.

In 1958, I broached the idea of a steam passenger railroad on the Landenberg Branch of the B & O Railroad between Marshallton or Greenbank and Hockessin, Delaware. Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc. was formed to advance this idea. Although numerous attempts were made to interest B & O management in Baltimore, none were successful until 1964, when several HRCV members called on then-Governor Elbert N. Carvel in his Dover office. The governor liked the idea, and he called his old college friend, Douglas Turnbull, a top official of the B & O. Wheels started to turn to make the idea come to reality, but there were many hurdles. Finally, by late 1965, approval was granted, and Wilmington & Western steam trains first ran between Greenbank and Mount Cuba on Memorial Day weekend 1966.

Dozens of other small railroads with similar aspirations came in the next few years, and many lasted only a short time. Most were all-volunteer operations. While costs were small compared to today, they were sometimes enough to close down an operation before it really got started. It’s not an easy thing to run a railroad successfully. The Wawa and Concordville in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, ran only a couple of years in the late 1960s. A passenger operation on the “Ma and Pa” southeast of Red Lion, Pennsylvania, lasted only briefly. The New Hope and Ivyland in Bucks County was short-lived originally but was revitalized and turned into a lasting attraction. Across the Delaware River, the Black River and Western ran briefly between Flemington and Lambertville, New Jersey.

By the 1970s, there were so many tourist railroads in the United States that a directory was published annually for the benefit of rail fans, some of whom traveled to ride on and photograph most of them. Although steam power was the main draw originally, it became increasingly difficult (and expensive) to operate steam locomotives, and many railroads that survived went to diesel power. To my knowledge, the Strasburg Railroad is still 100% steam, and the Wilmington & Western is about 2/3 diesel, using its steam locomotives sparingly.