

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 25, 2017

**Centerville and Southwestern Railway:** On my way home from the 1951 Steam Car Tour at Wellesley, Massachusetts, in our 1914 Stanley Model 607, accompanied by my friends Elwood Wilkins and Bob Ostwald, I stopped at a roadside 15"-gauge steam railroad near Pine Brook in northern New Jersey. It was a crude and short operation, but we rode around their short loop several times. The operator said "If you are really interested in miniature steam railroads, you need to visit Gene Becker's Centerville & Southwestern, only a few miles from here." It was the first time I had heard of it and nine years before the Auburn Valley was built.

Probably in September 1951, my father, Roy Bengé, and I sought out the Centerville & Southwestern, located on the vast grounds of Becker's Dairy near Roseland, New Jersey. It was a day to remember. The locomotive, 1/6 actual size for a track gauge of 9-1/2," had been built for Becker's father in 1940 in the shops of the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western and was an exact copy of the Lackawanna's famous 4-8-4 Northerns, which they called "Poconos." About eight passenger cars were pulled behind on a ride nearly two miles in length at an actual speed of about 20-25 m.p.h. Starting at a long station platform called Centerville, where an ice cream shop featured Becker's dairy products, the passenger trains crossed a stream, climbed a grade, and then sped through the countryside nearly one mile to a loop they went around to begin the return trip. Near the station, a turntable next to the railroad shops turned the locomotive for the next trip. The railroad operation, that required about three dairy employees, was on Saturdays only for six months and at least one weekday evening during warm weather.

On our initial visit, we met Henry E. "Gene" Becker, who was the third generation to operate the large wholesale dairy. He did much of the mechanical work on the railroad himself and had operating air brakes on each passenger car activated by a compressor on the locomotive. Gene also owned a Pierce Arrow "66," bought new by his grandfather about 1916. These cars with their massive 6-cylinder engines with a 5-inch bore and 7-inch stroke were few and far between (the U.S. Government owned one when Woodrow Wilson was president, and he liked it so much he bought it from the government when he left office). Gene's car did not have headlights in the fenders, a feature of Pierce Arrows from 1913 until the end of production in 1937. If a prospective owner objected to the odd appearance, the company would substitute drum headlights instead. Also in the immaculate power house for the dairy was a large operating Remington Corliss steam engine manufactured in Wilmington, Delaware (this was later offered to us for the Magic Age of Steam, but it was too big to consider).

In June 1956, Becker and his wife, along with another couple, made the round-trip in the big Pierce from their home to Ithaca, New York, to attend the AACA Spring Meet at Cornell University. On the return, Norbert Behrendt (my passenger in our Stanley Model 87) and I stopped for the night at the Montrose Inn, north of Scranton (PA). The Becker party was there as well, and Norbert and I asked Gene if he would come to the Steam Car Tour we were planning at Schwenksville, Pennsylvania, in September and show us a film he had made on the Centerville & Southwestern. He accepted, and it was a big hit with the audience.

The dairy property near Roseland of perhaps 200 acres was being squeezed by commercial development. About 1966, Interstate 280 from West Orange northwest to its junction with I-80 cut the property in two, and the old railroad loop at the far end of the run was on the wrong side of the new road. In an attempt to keep the ride nearly as long as it was before, new track was laid doubling back on the main property with a new "turning loop." By this time, a diesel locomotive had joined the 4-8-4 "steamer," and at busy times, two trains were in operation simultaneously. Early in 1972, however, the "game was up," and Becker announced that the dairy would close and the Centerville & Southwestern would make its last runs on Labor Day that year. The entire property, except for an acre or so around his home, was sold, presumably for development.

On a late summer evening during the last week of C & S operation, Weldin Stumpf, Bob Reilly, and I paid our final visit. Becker himself was running the steam locomotive, and business was good. Every available passenger car was pulled on the train -- I think it was about 15 cars. As darkness fell, it was a wonderful experience to ride one last time behind this great little 4-8-4. I asked him why he gave up. His answer was simple: "property taxes." He gave the locomotive to the Ford Museum, with the understanding that they would display it but that it would never operate again. I think the museum sold it or traded for something else.

I saw the Beckers several more times, as they enjoyed touring in their big Pierce Arrow. I know they went on many Glidden Tour revivals and at least once drove to the West Coast and return. Eventually, they retired to Florida, took the Pierce with them, and spent their final years there. They had no children.