



Stony Brook Railroad accident

The Stony Brook Railroad had its share of problems. Headed toward Deerfield, this double-engine freight split a switch at Forge Village in June, 1921 and crashed into the Abbot mill buildings. Two men died.

A look at tiny Stony Brook Railroad's 130-year history

(Gordon B. Seavey is a retired newspaperman and full-time history buff who writes occasionally on the bygone days of the Nashoba Valley.)
By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD - It is past midnight. Tadnuck Hill is dimly lighted by the soft rays of a diminishing full moon. The air is very still. The countryman, lying in his bed, hears the bell in the tower of the white meetinghouse on the Common strike three melodious notes.

The modern electric clock at the bedside confirms the hour. He knows that Pastor George Downey takes particular pride that the "town timepiece" is kept in perfect mechanical order even though much of its mechanism has been counting the hours for generations.

The countryman listens a few moments. There's a slight rumble, seemingly from the West.

Is it an Army helicopter from nearby Fort Devens? Is it an off-schedule plane flying freight to the West Coast or Canada? Or is it the echo of heavy truck tires beating against the pavement of Route 495?

Now comes the "blah" sound, softened by distance.

Ah, it must be the warning horn from a diesel engine, emitting a signal as it approaches the street crossing at Forge Village.

At that time of night, it may unnecessary to issue the warning to other traffic but these powerful locomotives, traveling at 40 miles per hour with countless tons of weight behind, like to assert their rightful domain, "King of the Rails."

The rumble comes from hundreds of wheels and groaning couplings on a long string of freight cars as they rock and roll above the rails. It is the Stony Brook Railroad line in action.

This is something it has been doing for 130 years. It never sleeps!

By the greatest of imagination, the Stony Brook Railroad line is a liny, tiny midget.

Once 13.19 miles long when first opened on July 3, 1848, subsequent realignments have reduced its present mileage to 10.88. It has never owned a single locomotive, nor freight or passenger car - just a couple of handcars for line inspection.

The importance of Stony Brook, however, as explained by local railroad buff and historian H. Arnold Wilder, is incalculable.

It is not a seedy, weedy, limited-maintained line which serves a postage-billed area. The line is modern; it takes only 15 minutes to complete the whole trip. And its usefulness is most important.

It is a connecting branch line that handles heavy freight traffic through Ayer to bypass the congested Boston area on the north and east. The other railroads need the Stony Brook to shuttle their equipment from the west and south at a connection in Ayer to join the Merrimack River route into New Hampshire, or to head further on to Portland and upper Maine.

It is a busy line. During World War II, it was estimated that something was traveling over this line on the average of every 20 minutes. Today, a couple

dozen regularly scheduled long freights pass along the route every 24 hours.

And then there are the "white flag" trains, the haughty specials carrying unusual cargo. One is a string of only gondola cars, each 80 feet long, each rushing 90 tons of coal from West Virginia to Bow, N.H., to feed a hungry electric generating plant.

Five groaning diesels are needed to pull this monstrous string, which runs about every three days. An eight-hour emptying process is conducted at the generating plant, and then the empties return to the coal fields. This train lost nine cars last week in a minor rail accident near its destination.

And in times past, considerable passenger traffic developed on the Stony Brook. Early local passenger service adopted schedules between Lowell and Ayer, which usually ran like clockwork. From Ayer, there were two "down" trains and one "up" in the morning, then a round-trip at 12 noon. To conclude the day's local travel arrangements, two "up" trains left Lowell in late afternoon, plus one "down." They passed one another in Westford.

In addition to carrying commuters to Lowell

(change here for Boston), these trains hauled the mail and handled express. Farmers shipped milk to the city in 8 or 40-quart jugs, all carried in the baggage car. Empty cans were returned on the evening run.

Combination passenger and freight stations of solid construction were erected at West Chelmsford, Westford, Graniteville and Forge Village, all with living quarters on the second floor.

On frosty mornings, commuters would pass the time of day around a roaring coal stove in the center of the waiting room. It was always about 20 degrees colder at Westford Depot than at the Center, according to Austin D. Fletcher.

Smaller stations were provided at Brookside (Nabnasset), North Littleton and "the Willows," earlier called Sandy Pond. Wilder has pictures of these old buildings, complete with blue and white porcelain designation signs, and billboards advertising current products of the day.

Village post offices were located near the stations. The postmasters' jobs were to meet the trains and hand carry the mail to the offices.

At Westford, however, a special carrier had a contract with Uncle Sam to

meet the trains, transporting the mail to a local post office located one and one-half miles up Depot Street in the Center.

When the Democrats were in power, the office was located in the J. M. Fletcher store on Lincoln Street. As the political fortunes switched to the Republicans, the post office moved across the Common to the general store (now occupied by Emerson Realty) where Republican Sherman H. Fletcher and Harwood L. (Dick) Wright handed out the mail.

The final local passenger train was on April 25, 1953, when Perry Shupe carried the last sacks of mail and newspapers in his Chevrolet sedan from Westford Depot to the Center.

Oldtimers remember Frank Dannister working the route on horseback and later Samuel H. Balch in a Model T touring car, the latter carrying passengers.