



Old Forge Village railroad station

A rear view photo made in 1948, was an active part in the business life of the community. Destroyed by fire 15 years after it was long abandoned, a

small park now marks the spot where everyone waited for the local trains to stop ... many decades ago.

Gather 'round, folks -- here comes the local Freight

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD--The shipping rates by rail a century ago seemed hardly enough to pay for firing the boilers of the old steam locomotives. A carload of coal, even though the contents weighed five tons, cost but three bucks for a 35-mile trip.

A leather-bound ledger, dated 1881-1884 and in clear, flowing handwriting, divulges a substantial part of the commercial life in a small community (in this case, Forge Village) in the days when most everything of considerable size and weight moved on rails.

The stationmaster at Forge Village, probably Luther Prescott, was also the freight agent in addition to his duties as ticket agent and wireless operator.

His ledger shows that people, merchandise, fuel, building materials, spirits and even the mails went by train. Many trains per day passed by his solidly built station. Three passenger trains, morning and night, plus an extra at noon, carried the people and the mails.

Through freights over his line, the old Stony Brook Railroad, carried unfold tons of shipping to and from the west and south. It was a 13-mile connecting link between Lowell and Ayer and operated no rolling stock of its own.

LOCAL FREIGHT

And then there was the local, daily freight that puffed up and down the valley, leaving shipments consigned to one or more of the seven local stations. Forge Village probably was the more active in the group.

There was raw wool, in great bales, arriving in large quantities to feed the rattling spindles of the Abbot Worsted mills. And the same plant needed much coal to fire the steam boilers when water

power was not available.

Wholesalers in nearby cities shipped groceries, grains and general merchandise to stock the two general stores in the village and others in nearby communities. The general public, too, was served by railroad freight shipments which carried much lower rates, but slower service, than by express.

Ernest Mountain operated one of the village stores. His was opposite the depot. One day, in Car No. 103, the following arrived: two barrels of molasses, two of sugar, two of oil; three chests of tea, one keg of soda; two boxes of tobacco, one each of bluing, potash, starch and two of mustard and general merchandise.

Also included in the shipment from Boston, which totalled in weight 3,700 lbs., were a bag of rice and three of salt. His freight bill was \$4.26! Another day he received 16 separate parcels from Lowell, weighing in at 1,350 lbs., and his freight bill was 79 cents.

FARMERS BENEFITED

Francis Hosmer had seven barrels of apples weighing half a ton shipped from Greenfield, N.H., for \$1.89.

Atwood Brothers, who operated one of the finest farms in Westford at the corner of Hildreth St. and Concord Rd. (Route 225), received a hay tedder frame, shafts and forks, weighing 500 lbs., and costing 25 cents for transportation from Ayer.

Mrs. A. King, who ran a boarding house for the mill workers, received barrels of flour, sugar, lard, soap, salt, and the like, plus boxes of yeast, butter and raisins, on many occasions. Her large house still stands near the Franco-American Club.

Even the school system benefited by

low freight rates. Consigned to George T. Day, a member of the school committee and later a highly respected selectman, were 21 school desks and chairs. This ton of freight from Boston cost \$2.42.

SMALL CARS

The freight cars were small and rarely carried more than a five-ton load. The rate for coal from Boston was about 60 cents a ton, and from Salem the same. Coal came from the fields in Pennsylvania and the Virginias by ship to these Massachusetts ports.

Coal for home heating was usually received direct from Mystic Wharf in Boston, with the name of the broker (Whithead & Co.) and the vessel (such as "Plymouth Rock") entered on the records. Some was consigned to Wright & Fletcher in Westford.

Abbot Worsted was a heavy user of coal, usually shipped during the summer months. And when shipments of wool came, it was in large lots. It cost them only \$25.20 to ship 100 bales from Boston but it required ten separate freight cars to handle the 34,200 lb. shipment.

A Littleton market operated by A. F. Conant & Co. regularly received meats from a wholesaler in Lowell. Six quarters of beef, weighing 900 lbs., cost them 63 cents in shipping charges. If beef were high in price in those days, one couldn't blame it onto transportation costs. Some rates were even lower. Fish apparently received a special rate because the charge for 100 lbs. was seven cents; and 350 lbs. of cheese, 25 cents.

ICE HARVESTING

Thomas S. Hittinger, getting ready to harvest ice on nearby Forge Pond, had a barrel of tar (to patch roofs) and

a ton of lumber shipped from Lowell for \$2.50. Twenty-one tons of coal to fire his steam boilers came from Mystic Wharf at a cost of \$27.43 in freight. Steam power was used to raise the heavy ice cakes up into the ice houses by means of a continuous moving chain.

Household furniture moved by freight, rather than horse and wagon. From Lowell, Mrs. M. Casey received a bedset, complete with commode, chairs, towel rack and table, all weighing 700 lbs., and her freight bill was 49 cents.

Samuel Boothroyd's piano, shipped in four sections and weighing a ton, cost him an extra \$1.40 for freight to Forge Village. S. A. Hamlin got enough furniture, weighing two tons, to furnish a small apartment, with a bill of lading for \$2.80.

SPECIAL LISTING

Throughout the records there appears the name of J.W. Sprague receiving barrels of "merchandise" from time to time, with no special description. But now and then a substitute agent would name the contents, perhaps unwittingly, which led one to believe that something was being spirited into the town.

It was.

One item for Mr. Sprague was a barrel of rum from Boston, weight 400 lbs., shipping charge 48 cents. A hoghead of ale, 750 lbs. from Lowell, cost 45 cents. A barrel of beer from Lawrence, 35 cents. Then, two barrels of whiskey, transhipped from Ayer, amounted to 43 cents and a case of flasks cost a quarter.

Mr. Sprague was operating a "lavern" in the cellar of his home, near the boarding house. Perhaps it was all perfectly legal!