

Much activity about Westford Depot

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — One of the longest thoroughfares in Westford is Depot Street. It stretches from Westford Center across Stony Brook to the junction of Dunstable and Tyngsboro Roads.

Yet there is no such thing as a Westford depot. It was demolished 30 years ago after being closed for several years. Declining passenger and express needs caused its demise as automobiles and trucks took over. But the name and memories linger.

The Boston & Maine's last local passenger train, from Worcester via Ayer and the Stony Brook line, to Lowell was dropped on April 25, 1963.

The Stony Brook Railroad Company was formed to build a connecting link between North Chelmsford and Groton Junction, now Ayer since 1871. Upon completion, it was leased to the Nashua and Lowell Railroad in 1848.

The new company had no rolling stock, but established four passenger and freight stations in Brookside (Nabnasset), Westford, Graniteville and Forge Village in this town. Others were at West Chelmsford and North Littleton. Passenger trains ran on regular schedules, up and down the line, morning, noon and night, except Sundays.

Most of the passengers were headed for Worcester, Lowell or Boston. It served businessmen, shoppers and students, and the regulars used monthly ride tickets which were duly punched by affable conductors, one punch per trip. Bound for Boston, all passengers were required to change at Lowell.

The front of the Westford station boasted a bay window, in which was the telegraph instrument, usually clicking away in meaningless messages to the ears of the public. One room was devoted to express packages, another of equal size for passengers. In cold weather, passengers would huddle around the pot-bellied stove discussing affairs of the town.

Good weather found passengers waiting on the platform watching the waters pour over the dam as Stony Brook rushed to its next mill pond at Brookside.

As each train came to a hissing halt, passengers would climb aboard, some for the smoking car which was combined with a baggage section, but most (including all women) entered the regular coach with its plush seats. If it were a group of three or four, one seat back could be flipped over, making a foursome.

Regular commuters often had a "reserved" four-seater so they could enjoy a card game. Harry B. Prescott was one of the most stalwart of all commuters, going daily from his home at 28 Depot to the Boston Wharf Company, up to the time all passenger travel was stopped.

H. Arnold Fisher, a noted railroad buff,

reports that Mrs. J. Willard Fletcher (Etta Whidden) was the long-time agent and telegraph operator. Then came John B. "Jack" Gray, in the '20's, and when promoted to general freight agent, Joe Murphy came to Westford. Mrs. Walter Fletcher, Sr., served as caretaker of the station in 1928 after the post of agent was abolished. It was her duty to open the station as a shelter, light the fires and clean the floors and the lamps, until the building was torn down.

The 8:15 a.m. train was the one on which local farmers would ship milk in great jugs to Lowell at a very low rate. George Hartford, who made a meager living on an old farm on Patten Road near Westford Academy, could be seen daily carrying a couple of jugs by wagon through town to the Depot, a round trip distance of perhaps six miles. Empty jugs would return on evening trains.

There was rural free delivery mail service in town, but to get the mail from the railroad to the post office, a distance of 1 1/2 miles, required a special courier. Old timers will remember Frank

Bannister, his long legs moving him at a rapid pace, carrying the mail (only a sack or two) slung over his shoulder, heading to the post office in the grocery store at the common.

Later, when Samuel Balch retired as a RFD man, he brought the mail in a Model T. He was allowed to carry express packages and passengers as a sideline for a small fee. It was reported that when one pretty young lady in town was to be married, he transported packages to her home "as my wedding present to you!"

Wilder reminds us that Perry Shupe of Boston Road was the last mail courier when the trains discontinued carrying it in 1953. The B & M put on green and yellow buses for a while to take up the slack on the passenger service, but this lasted for only a few months.

The last regularly scheduled passenger train to run along Stony Brook Valley was the famed State of Maine Express, speeding from Portland to New York and Philadelphia via Worcester. After 49 years, the "State" ended service on October 29, 1960.