

Stony Brook RR Line

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — It is past midnight. Tadmuck hill is dimly lit by the soft light 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 his 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 truck traffic noise pounding along Route 495?

Now comes a distinct "blah," 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 not be necessary to issue the warning to other traffic but these powerful locomotives, travelling at 40 miles per hour with many tons of weight behind, like to assert their rightful domain, "King of the rails."

They Never Sleep

The rumble comes from hundreds of wheels and groaning couplings on a long string of freight cars as they roll and rock 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 tiny, tiny midgel. Once 13.19 miles long when first opened July 4, 1848, subsequent re-alignment has reduced its present mileage to 10.86. It has never owned a single locomotive nor freight or passenger car. Just a couple of handcars for line inspection.

The importance of the 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-size area. The line is modern; it takes only 15 minutes to complete the whole trip. Its usefulness is most important.

Stony Brook RR is a connecting branch line that handles heavy freight traffic through Ayer to by-pass 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 travelling over this line on the average of every 20 minutes. Today, a couple of dozen regularly scheduled long freights pass along the route every 24 hours.

Special Trains, Too

And then there are the "white flag" trains, the haughty specials carrying unusual cargo. One is a string of only gondola cars, each 90 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 done at the light plant, and then the empties head back to the coal fields.

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 noon. To conclude the day's local travel arrangements, two "up" trains left Lowell late afternoon, plus one "down." They passed one another at 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 eight or forty quart jugs, all carried in the baggage car. Empty cans were returned on the evening run.

Sturdy RR Stations

Combination passenger and freight stations of solid construction were erected at West Chelmsford, Westford, Graniteville and Forge, 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.

Station agents and trainmen were friendly people. Doris Warren, as a girl attending school in Lowell, remembers being lifted off (or on) the car platform by a cordial conductor at North Littleton when the snow was too deep to negotiate properly.

Village post offices were located near the stations so the postmasters' jobs were to meet the train 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 mails to the post office located 1½ miles up Depot St. to 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 Republicans Sherman H. Fletcher and Harwood L. (Dick) Wright handed out the mail.

Mail by Truck

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. Old timers remember Frank Bannister working the route on horseback and later Samuel H. Balch in a Model T touring car, the latter carrying passengers. New mail routes had to be established, using trucks. For the first time in many years, the time schedule of mail deliveries was changed.

It was a special treat to youngsters, in particular, to watch any train roaring by, especially if the engines were belching white steam and black smoke. The firemen, engineers and trainmen were always willing to give out a friendly wave of the hand.

On rare occasions, a very special treat was to see a circus or a "camp" with their colorful equipment. Carrying the "white flag" and operating at odd times, these specials drew much attention.

To transport youngsters from many parts of the country to the cool of summer camps in northern New England, sleeping cars from various lines would be assembled in such places as Chicago and Washington into special trains and it was natural and convenient to use the Stony Brook line as a connector.

Many youngsters got an early preview of New England topography as these trains skirted Spectacle Pond in Littleton, Forge in Westford and Crystal in North Chelmsford while following rushing Stony Brook to where it meets the Merrimack at North Chelmsford.

Its Last Run

It was a sad day for railroad fans when the State of Maine Express passed into history in 1960. This famous train, a favorite with celebrities, ran at night for fifty years between Portland and New York City.

Leaving Portland at 9:45 p.m., it stopped at Lowell to pick up an extra sleeping car and passed along Stony Brook Valley around 1 a.m. The Boston & Maine took it as far as Worcester; the New Haven into New York City, arriving at 7:42.

From New York, a similar train left Grand Central at 9 p.m. every day, passing the southbound train at Worcester, and then slipping down the Stony Brook line two hours later to arrive at 6:45 a.m. in Portland. The train was just under ten hours.

Two popular summer specials were the Bar Harbor Express from Philadelphia and New York to Bar Harbor, a night train, and the East and West Wind expresses that operated during the day from New York to Portland. These were very popular with vacationers.

Section Crew

Guardians of the track in all kinds of weather were the section crew, one of which operated from Westford Depot to Ayer in charge of Andrew Johnson. His small tool shed, large enough to hold a hand-car, was located near the mill dam.

The station agent was regarded as an important figure in the community. He was the master of the clattering telegraph, presides over the ticket case, and the waybills. He saw to it that the lamps were lighted at night, the waiting room swept and the fire kept burning for the "social hour" that preceded each train departure.

Local Financing

The Stony Brook Railroad was an area corporation, financed principally with money which came from the Lowell region. At the time of its founding, it was considered quite a gamble, encouraged by the fact that the railroad was found to be superior to the recently opened Middlesex Canal that ran from Lowell to Boston.

Its importance to the development of the Valley, with its industries, quarries and farms, being established, was tempting to the investors. The Company never owned railroad equipment and it still injects regularly in Lowell.

When the connector line was completed in 1848, it was leased immediately to the Nashua & Lowell Railroad, and taken over in 1887 by the Boston & Maine system.

John William Pitt Abbot, an important figure not only in his home town of Westford but the state as well during the mid 1800's, was the president for several years. Raw materials to the Abbot mills were received by rail — the finished product shipped by rail.

At one period, three rail lines served Westford. There was the "Red Line" so-called because it was such a business failure that the rails were rusty most of the time. This was the Nashua & Andover, running from Nashua into Concord Junction. It operated from 1873 to 1925.

The third line was the electric street car line which ran up the Valley, almost parallel to the Stony Brook Railroad, from North Chelmsford to Ayer. At a point near St. Catherine's Church in Graniteville, the Red Line crossed over the other two lines using the recently well-publicized "overcrossing bridge" — a means to avoid ground-level crossings.