

THE NYO&W: WHAT IF?

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When I was a kid, I used to read piles of comic books. What self-respecting kid didn't? In the DC comics (Superman, Batman, etc) they would, from time to time, run "Imaginary Stories." As if the comics were real?

In any case, these "imaginary" stories posited different timelines and happenings from the story arcs that populated these pulp masterpieces on a monthly basis. They could get downright ridiculous at times, but were fun to get lost in.

Thinking about those "imaginary" stories all these years later – and going out several times to traipse the O&W right-of-way, and thinking about the political and natural history of Orange, Sullivan, and Delaware counties – gave me an idea to concoct an imaginary timeline of my own for the Old Woman.

So indulge me, as I wind the clock back and turn it in an altogether different direction...

1955: The New York, Ontario and Western railway enters its 18th year of bankruptcy, clinging to the few customers it can in an attempt to keep the doors open. In New Jersey, a combined court action by the Erie, Lackawanna, Susquehanna, Jersey Central, and Pennsylvania railroads is taken to force the state to either take over all operations of perennial money-losing commuter rail lines, or see them shut down completely.

The New York, Susquehanna and Western Railroad and Lehigh and New England Railway start informal merger talks in an attempt to reduce expenses and maintain cement and crushed stone traffic. Meanwhile, the Erie and Lackawanna continue discussions about a merger of operations.

Later that year, Hurricanes Connie and Diane both pass over the Delaware River basin, causing extreme flooding and damage to lines of the Lackawanna, Erie, LNE, Susquehanna, Lehigh Valley, Jersey Central, and Lehigh & Hudson River railroads. The Erie mainline between Calicoon and just north of the line's Port Jervis, NY yards is washed out completely in several places, as is the Lackawanna mainline in the Poconos, particularly in Stroudsburg, Analomink, and Devil's Hole. Both lines make temporary arrangements to run traffic over the NYO&W mainline, connecting via the LH&R at Campbell Hall. A connecting track is quickly built at Hancock, NY to the Erie main.

It soon becomes obvious that the O&W main and tunnels need upgrading to handle the increased traffic. Not only that, construction of the New York State Thruway is underway, and a new "quickway" is planned to connect Binghamton, NY through the Catskills to New York City. The "quickway" expressway will cut through the O&W mainline in several places,

leading to discussions between the O&W, Erie, and Lackawanna and the state department of transportation.

1956: Repairs are made to the Erie main line by January, and much of the Erie and Lackawanna traffic is re-routed back from the O&W. The Lackawanna is forced to sell all of its stock in the Nickel Plate Railroad to play for repairs to its Pocono trackage, while the Erie is able to maintain operations and revenue in the black, albeit at reduced levels. The Susquehanna and LNE continue merger talks, as do the Erie and Lackawanna.

Preliminary testing by geologists from Esso and Shell reveal vast, untapped wells of natural gas and shale oil in the ground along the Delaware River and its tributaries in the southern Catskills. Plans are made to secure permits from the New York Department of Environmental Protection to construct and operate several test drills near Downsville, south of the reservoir; in Fishes Eddy, East Branch, and west of Roscoe.

Pharmaceutical maker Pfizer announces it has developed tamoxifen, an oncological drug for the treatment of various cancers with a high success rate. The natural compounds that are part of the formulation are found in eastern hemlock trees, in abundance in the Catskill Mountains. Pfizer starts construction on a laboratory in Liberty, NY; close to both the NYO&W and the proposed "quickway," and secures logging permits to harvest small amounts of trees to develop the drug for further testing.

Two strong hurricanes (Amelia and Dorothy) pass through the northeast in early July and late August, creating flooding and again damaging miles of track belonging to the Erie, New Haven, and L&HR. Once again, the Erie is forced to re-route much of its westbound traffic over the O&W to Hancock, building eastbound and westbound connecting tracks at the Graham Line overpass just north of Middletown to avoid traffic crossings in town.

The Susquehanna and LNE agree to the terms of a merger, creating the Lehigh Susquehanna Railway, pending ICC approval. In a surprise move, a new company – New York and Ontario Transportation – offers to purchase the O&W's Port Jervis and Kingston branch for \$1 million and abandon the connection to Monticello. The NYOT cites steady online traffic for lumber, dairy, and industrial plants near Ellenville (Channel Master). Bankruptcy Court Judge Conger agrees to allow continued operation of the railroad while studying the possible sale of trackage in pieces.

1957: The New York State Department of Transportation unveils its planned right-of-way for the new "quickway" through Orange, Sullivan, and Delaware counties. As expected, the expressway will cut through the O&W tracks in several places. A plan is also announced to blast away and level parts of Hawk Mountain for the new highway, which will impact the O&W.

To the east, the Department of Defense announces plans to upgrade Stewart Air Force base to handle heavy bombers and fighters for the Air Force and a helicopter base for the Army and Army National Guard. Both the Erie and O&W enter talks with DOD to build a rail spur to the airport to move heavy equipment and tank cars.

A particularly heavy snowfall occurs in late January and early February, accompanied by extremely cold temperatures. It is followed two weeks later by a sudden thaw and near-springlike temperatures, creating massive ice jams and flooding along the upper Delaware that once again damages and severs the Erie mainline in several places, along with flooding its Port Jervis yards. The Erie immediately routes traffic back over the O&W through its Campbell Hall and Graham Line connections, running into bottlenecks and slow orders at Shawangunk, Fallsburgh, and Hawk Mountain tunnels. Additional sidings and passing tracks are hurriedly constructed at Summitville, Hurleyville (Luzon), and Livingston Manor.

The Lehigh Susquehanna merger is approved by the ICC, with a target date of September 1. Talks between the Erie and Lackawanna continue, and the L&HR asks to join the merger. Yellow Freight, a new interstate trucking company, approaches the New Haven railroad about building a truck-trailer "inter-modal" facility at Maybrook yard, presumably to connect with the new "quickway" and an east-west interstate highway (I-84) proposed by the Eisenhower Administration.

The NYO&W continues in bankruptcy, operated by trustee Freeman. Judge Conger considers strong proposals from both the NYOT and the New York Central, which wants to buy the line from Central Square, NY to the port at Oswego for \$800,000. The NYCRR cites strong traffic along the line from Nestle's chocolate plant in Fulton, a brewery being built south of Fulton, and port shipping (mostly taconite and minerals) from Great Lakes boats.

1958: Weather wise, it's a quiet year. Esso and Shell jointly announce plans to develop a large natural gas extraction and storage plant between Roscoe and East Branch, citing the availability of nearby rail transportation and the new "quickway" for trucking. The site choice proves to be controversial as, although it is outside park boundaries, is close to some of the best trout-fishing streams in the country. Challenges to the plan are immediately filed in the state Supreme Court by environmental groups.

Pfizer finishes construction of its Liberty, NY facility and begins harvesting hemlock trees and manufacturing of tamoxifen in small quantities for clinical trials. The NYO&W builds a spur to the plant and is soon bringing in several tank cars of chemicals per week. To the east, IBM announces it will build a state-of-the-art semiconductor manufacturing facility near Accord, NY along the O&W. The company plans to use several million gallons of water per year from the nearby Rondout Creek, processed through a wastewater plant on-site before discharge. This plant will further increase O&W tank car traffic.

In a surprise move, the Erie Railroad makes an offer in bankruptcy court to purchase the NYO&W mainline all the way from Cornwall, NY to the connection at Hancock for \$3 million, and abandon the rest. In a joint statement with NY Department of Transportation officials, it is announced that the state will, at their expense, relocate and upgrade the O&W rights of way along the new "quickway," building a new, double-wide and taller tunnel with a liner through the Shawangunk Mountains and removing the Hawk Mountain Tunnel altogether.

Additional funds will be made available through state transportation bonds to construct a second, larger bore at Fallsburgh to handle new “inter-modal” traffic that is expected to originate at the Yellow Freight facility in Maybrook. The Erie also announces it will upgrade the track and ballast through Orange and Sullivan counties, adding 2nd track in some locations. The Department of Transportation will build an overpass for the O&W mainline across the “quickway” at Ferndale, and the O&W gets permission from Judge Conger to borrow money to make improvements to various highway crossings and the Ferndale trestle. Freeman and Conger are finally convinced that the smaller, leaner, and upgraded rail line is viable.

The Erie also plans to abandon its “old” line through Orange County and switch all traffic to its Graham Line. The Erie plan to purchase the O&W includes running local freight service to Middletown on the O&W line from Campbell Hall, as it traverses mostly countryside with fewer grade crossings. A small yard will be maintained in Middletown.

The line east of Campbell Hall will be used to access Stewart Air Force Base, with the tracks taken out of service east of the Thruway (although an overpass has already been built for the right-of-way). Meanwhile, the Erie mainline along the Delaware River to Hancock will be maintained as a secondary track.

Merger talks between the Lackawanna and Erie are picked up again, with the L&HR as a possible third partner. The Lehigh Susquehanna reports a drop in revenue, due to an increase in shipments of cement going increasingly by truck, and reduced demand for coal. The road looks into constructing an “inter-modal” train/truck facility at its yards in Little Ferry, NJ and Catasaqua, PA (near Allentown).

1959: After a year of deliberation and hearing arguments from all sides, Judge (name) states that *“it’s time to close the books on the Ontario and Western,”* and issues his ruling. On March 27, 1959, he approves the sale of the former Kingston Branch to the New York and Ontario Transportation Company, effective June 1, 1959. The sale of the main line from Cornwall to Hancock to the Erie Railroad is also approved as of the same date, as is the section from Central Square to Fulton and Oswego to the New York Central.

The court announces a period of bidding for the rights to salvage the rest of the line from Cadosia to Central Square, starting on June 1. Several companies immediately file bids, including the Wellsville, Addison, and Galesburg. All sales are subject to review and approval by the Interstate Commerce Commission and New York State, a process which is expected to happen quickly. The balance of track and property is eventually auctioned off for \$8 million.

The Erie promptly files papers with the ICC to abandon its “old line” tracks from Campbell Hall, NY through Goshen and Middletown, simultaneously dropping commuter service to all towns including Port Jervis. It is expected that Short Line bus service will pick up the slack. The Erie also announces plans to connect its Newburgh Branch to the O&W at Meadowbrook (Vail’s Gate), abandoning the line south from there to Campbell Hall.

In New Jersey, the state Supreme Court rules in favor of the railroads as “*aggrieved parties*” that have “*incurred heavy and repeated financial losses*” in providing commuter rail service. The court rules that all railroads can cease NJ commuter operations at midnight, January 1, 1960, subject to the expected ICC review and approval. The state immediately announces that it will establish an agency responsible for subsidizing the entire cost of commuter rail service, under the NJ Department of Transportation. This will ensure that commuter service continues uninterrupted through the year and after the deadline.

All railroads that operate passenger ferries from Jersey City and Hoboken to Manhattan announce plans to cease operation on 1/1/1960, concurrent with the switchover to state-operated commuter service. It is expected that commuters will now use the Port Authority Trans-Hudson (PATH) trains to enter Manhattan.

Relieving railroads of the financial losses from commuter rail service has an immediate and positive impact on their balance sheets. The Erie – Lackawanna merger talks are suspended for now, especially in the wake of discoveries of massive natural gas and shale oil reserves in the Poconos and Endless Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania – easily served by Lackawanna trains. Test wells are already being drilled and an oil and gas storage/loading facility is planned for Nicholson, PA to transport hundreds of oil tank cars a week to refineries in the New York City and Philadelphia areas.

The Lehigh Susquehanna Railway reports a sharp decline in revenue for the year 1958, as more of its cement and crushed stone shippers shift to trucks and the line begins to run a deficit. Privately, the line enters into merger talks with the Jersey Central Railroad, which is experiencing its own decline in freight revenues and which already has a track-sharing agreement with the Lehigh Valley Railroad from Allentown to Wilkes-Barre, to save money.

The United States Army Corps of Engineers reveals its plan to build an enormous dam at the Delaware Water Gap as a flood control project. Known as the Tocks Island Dam, it will displace thousands of residents, small villages, farms, and summer camps, and will flood the valley all the way to Milford, PA. (Opposition to the dam is immediate and widespread!)

The Corps plans to use Lackawanna trains to bring in construction materials and equipment through its Cut-Off line to Slateford, PA and north to the dam site just east of Stroudsburg. A new interstate highway on the books, I-80, will cross the river just below the dam, providing a scenic view for tourists.

TO BE CONTINUED...