

The Midland & Beyond
All Aboard The "Old and Weary Special"
By Richard F. Palmer

Waiting at the New York, Ontario & Western station in Middletown on a wintry December 7, 1949 was an unusual consist of F-3 locomotive 502, a steam heater car, a parlor car, and business car 30, the famous "Warwick. "

The train, dubbed the Old and Weary Special, was made up for Samuel Rosoff, leading bidder to purchase the ailing railroad, to make an inspection tour of the line from Middletown to Oswego with side trips to Utica and Scranton. Rosoff, a heavy construction contractor from New York City, felt he could rescue the railroad from oblivion. Known as "Subway Sam, " he had built major portions of New York City's subways in the 1920s and 1930s.

Rosoff was born in Minsk, Russia he came to America in 1895. As a boy he was a "news butcher" on local railroads. After saving enough money he went into the salvage business. His first job was raising a sunken ship in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Eventually he became involved in the construction business and in 1925 secured a contract from the city of New York to build 10 blocks of subway tunnels. Over the years he received an estimated \$50 million in subway contracts in New York. Up to the time of his death it was believed he built more miles of subway than any other builder in history.

The N.Y.O. & W. railroad had been in deep financial trouble for decades and Rosoff said he felt he could bail it out. It was the basic reason for existence as a coal hauler and had all but ceased and the freight business was meager. There seemed little hope of developing new business in this predominantly rural region. It once had a prosperous milk hauling business but by now it had gone to trucks. During the depression its once thriving summertime passenger business in connection with the Catskill resorts had nearly evaporated.

The railroad had fallen so deeply in debt that it went into receivership in 1937. Creditors and investors demanded action. On November 30, 1949 a federal court hearing was held in New York City before Judge Edward A.

Conger which asked Trustees Raymond L. Gebhardt and Ferdinand J. Sieghardt how they were progressing trying to sell railroad to the highest bidder.

Rosoff tried to convince the judge he should postpone any action so as to him time to study the possibilities and submit a purchase offer and a proper time. His request was granted.

His most recent railroad ventures were the financially ailing El Paso & Southwestern and Mexico Northwestern Railways which he said were "in worse shape than the O&W." He poured \$3 million into them and they became profitable. Years later they were absorbed into the Southern Pacific.

Rosoff's tour of the O.& W. was arranged by General Superintendent Fred Hawk. Representing the railroad were trustees Gebhardt and Sieghardt; William F. Matthieson, vice president and general auditor; Elbert N. Oakes, general counsel for the trustees; and Ralph E. Wright, general freight agent. Accompanying Rosoff were his attorney, Jacob I. Golstein and his accountant, Zivel B. Niden.

While aboard the train Sieghardt told Rosoff: "There is nothing wrong with the O. & W. itself. Our rolling stock is in an excellent condition. We have loyal employees, our system is well maintained, our shops are modernly equipped and the outlook could be good. We need only one thing - traffic. If we could get \$50,000 or \$60,000 in extra revenue we would be operating in the black in a short space of time. The whole answer is traffic."

The train made brief stops at Liberty, Hancock, Walton, Sidney, Norwich and Hamilton to meet with local officials and reporters. From Hamilton it was non-stop to Oswego.

Among Rosoff's comments to the press were:

"If it is possible to save the Ontario and Western financially, then I am going to do it."

"I went to see Judge Conger on Nov. 30. I told him I had heard the road was going to be dismantled - that it was going to be cut up and taken in parts by the highest bidder. I told Judge Conger I would be interested in taking over the road if I could have time to go over it - make a study of it. I

asked for three months and he gave me 30 days. I made a date with the trustees and here we are. So far, aside from the financial condition, what I have found out has been surprising. We went through the shop in Middletown, and I found it up to date and well run. I think the trustees have done a good job with the funds they have to work with.

"The road bed is in good condition and the rolling stock is as good as any in the United States. I happen to know the road from one end to the other and most of the large shippers along the way. I believe the line is a necessity for the State of New York and the counties through which it runs. I think its loss would mean much to the farmers and manufacturers and a burden on the merchants themselves. It is true though that the road needs a lot of support in more freight and help of new industries. Then it can live!"

Rosoff said he was aware some speculators were anxious to scrap it. But that was not his intention. The group dined aboard Car 30 with old time O&W chef Isaac "Ike" Hasbrouck doing the honors. He was an old friend of Rosoff," who had been employed by the O&W for 48 years. Hasbrouck was hired by the railroad as a steward in 1905.

The inspection train arrived in Oswego at 9:30 p.m. Rosoff and his associates spent the night at the Hotel Pontiac while the railroad officials stayed at a local tourist home. The next morning they toured O. & W. facilities before continuing on their journey.

Rosoff noted while in Oswego: "believe the possibility is good for reviving the coal business which the railroad enjoyed years ago." He added proposed port improvements would enhance the railroad's business." Little did he know at the time that the O&W between Fulton and Oswego would be purchased eight years later by the New York Central.

After leaving Oswego the train proceeded to Clinton Junction where it went around the wye and backed down into Utica, a distance of about eight miles, to Utica Union Station. Mason C. Taylor, then a reporter for the Utica Observer-Dispatch, noted in an article on December 8:

" As No. 30, powered by a two-section Diesel, backed from the Rome branch switch into Utica this afternoon, Rosoff stood at the back door, flanked by railroad officials. As the train slid by industrial plants, vacant

land and sidings, he fired a volley of questions at his companions. He wanted to know about everything - what industry this was - how its business is - whether it gets its fuel from the O&W. He shows special interest in vacant property owned by the railroad and its suitability for industrial use.

"Rosoff and his party remained in the Union Station yards only long enough for members to make some phone calls and send some telegrams. The train then headed back south, enroute to Scranton, Pennsylvania, where the party will spend the night."

Most of what appeared in newspapers along the O&W were the same Associated Press news story, or a slight variation of it. Two of the more interesting articles regarding Rosoff's trip, written by reporter James E. Beamish, appeared in the Scranton Tribune on December 9, 1949:

"Samuel Rosoff, the man who made millions through a lifetime of building, wants to purchase the financially crippled New York, Ontario and Western with its 544 miles of tracks reaching from Maybrook Yard, New York, to the shores of Lake Ontario and another set of double tracks into the anthracite field.

"Of course, I want to buy it. I can put this road right back in good shape again. I'm going to Federal Court in New York on Jan. 4 with a sealed offer for the whole thing, lock, stock and barrel. Some buzzards or vultures, I guess you call them, are hanging around right now. They think this is a corpse and they want to eat it up. But I'm not going to let them. I can save this railroad and I know it. " Mr. Rosoff said as he granted an interview in a coach of the special train that brought the party to Childs Yard, near Carbondale, last night.

"We found out one thing as I traveled to Oswego and Utica and Middletown and down here. The O&W is in good condition and it's worthy buying and it's worth saving," he added.

Mr. Rosoff was accompanied by R. L. Gebhardt and Ferdinand J. Sieghardt, trustees of the bankrupt road; Attorney Jacob I. Goldstein, legal representative for Mr. Rosoff; Fred Hawk, Middletown, N.Y., general superintendent of the O&W; Ralph E. Wright, general freight agent for the O&W.

The New York millionaire, who made his fortune by building some of New York State, "built the biggest highways as well as a large part of the New York City subway system, cited the fact that he bought the El Paso and Southern Railway four years ago when it was bankrupt and that the 500-mile line now has 2,800 employees and is in a thriving condition.

"And I can do the same here. I am positive it," said the five feet-seven inch grey-haired financier and builder. "I'm more than pleased with the conditions along the road and I'm delighted with the shops at Middletown as well as the Diesel equipment. The spirit of the people along the right-of-way served by the O&W is good. They want the railroad to succeed. Some towns have even offered to abate taxes to help me do this job," Rosoff commented.

"Mayor Monahan has sent me here to assure you of the backing of the City of Carbondale in this movement to help the Ontario and Western Railroad. I attended the hearings in Judge Conger's Court in New York and I am familiar with the situation. We stand ready to help you all we can," Carbondale's James D. Stone said.

Mr. Rosoff thanked him for the offer and replied that he had been greeted at many cities, towns and villages along the right of way of the O&W. "Why I met people I hadn't laid eyes on in 50 years. I got plenty of offers of assistance, including financial, in my desire to have this railroad put back in good condition. That's what we need - help and plenty of it. If I can purchase this railroad I will do all in my power to put it back in sound shape, and I know I can do it if I'm given the chance."

When Mr. Rosoff was asked whether he would expend additional money to develop the railroad after he purchased it, he answered that he was "no magician. But I'll do everything that it is in my power. We need the farmers, the newspapers, the banks, the small businessmen, the mine owners, the plant owners and everybody else to help us to do the job. That's the answer. This is like Barnum and Bailey. Everybody along the line wants to see me, said Mr. Rosoff jovially as he appeared in the corridor of the observation car where the general interview was held. "To say that I'm pleased with the enthusiastic reception is putting it mildly. Everybody seems to be behind us in this move to put the O&W back on its feet

again,"he added.

At a nod from Zivel B. Niden, certified public accountant accompanying Mr. Rosoff. Mr. Gebhardt broke in to say he appreciated what the newspapers had been doing, but that they were hurting the railroad when they referred to it as the "Old and Weary." The use of "Old and Weary" interference to the Ontario and Western has reacted unfavorably against us in our efforts to maintain this railroad. People believe it is a broken down old wreck and that the equipment is no good," he added.

He was interrupted by Mr. Rosoff who said that he was "agreeably surprised" to learn the true condition of the coal and freight carrier. "I expected that it would be an old worn-out railway with the ties sticking up in the air and the engines falling apart. Instead, I found a system with a fine road-bed and excellent rolling stock. The O&W is in good condition, and you can quote me on that," Mr. Rosoff said.

"I'm sick and tired of that damned name "Old and Weary"as applied to this railroad," Mr. Gebhardt added. He disclosed that the diesel locomotives on the road (it is all dieselized) are valued at more than \$5 1/2 million.

At this, Mr. Niden suggested that the O&W "in the future be alluded to as the "Onward and Working" railroad. Mr. Rosoff and Mr. Gebhardt nodded in assent. Mr. Sieghardt then stated that there was "nothing wrong with the O&W. Our rolling stock is in an excellent condition, we have loyal employees, our system is well maintained, our shops are modernly equipped and the outlook could be good. We need only one thing - traffic. If we had traffic this O&W would be one of the best roads in this country Why if we could get \$50,000 or \$60,000 extra revenue we would be operating in the black, in a short space of time. The whole answer is traffic," Mr. Sieghardt said.

Solicitor Stone and Carbondale City Treasurer Martin J. Healey greeted Mr. Rosoff and his party. Attorney Stone represented Mayor William L. Monahan who is on a hunting trip to Pike County. The three-car special train, powered by double Diesel unit 502, was brought into Childs Yard by Orin E. Allen, veteran engineer.

The crew was replaced at Childs by Fred Connor, conductor; William Fife, engineer; Michael A. Kindle, fireman, and George Green, trainman.

The Scranton Tribune on December 9, 1949: reported:

Cusick Greets Rosoff Here:

Visitor Tired, but Jubilant

By Jack Lewis

It was a tired, but jubilant Samuel R. Rosoff who checked into the Hotel Casey at 9:35 o'clock last night after completion of a two-day tour of the bankrupt New York, Ontario and Western Railroad. The fabulous subway builder was greeted at the hotel by P. F. Cusick, president of the Standard Brewing Co., a long-time friend.

Mr. and Mrs. Cusick offered Mr. Rosoff the hospitality of their Lake Henry residence, but the New York man will take off at an early hour this morning via the Lackawanna Railroad for his home. Thus he decided to stay overnight at the Casey.

Mr. Rosoff, who went on record earlier in the evening as planning to purchase the O&W, said that making the inspection trip was like "attending a circus. Every couple of minutes flash bulbs popped and my picture was taken then I was hit with a barrage of questions by newsmen."

However, one of the big thrills, according to Mr. Rosoff, was when the president of Hotel Casey, asked the subway builder to register in a special hotel book for celebrities from all walks of life. This book has been signed by such names as George M. Cohen, Henry Wallace, John L. Lewis, the late Wiley Post, Jim Crowley, Irene Dunne, Jack Dempsey and Theodore Roosevelt II.

Mr. Cusick said his visit with Rosoff was strictly a friendly visit with an "old friend." He said "I have no interest in buying into a railroad. Mr. Cusick recalled that he has known the New Yorker for at least 30 years. Mr. Rosoff said Mr. Cusick donated an altar at the Blessed Sacrament Church in the Bronx, N.Y., an edifice whose foundations were built by Mr. Rosoff."

Apparently the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad was at least interested in portions of the O. & W. On January 10, 1950 a group of New Haven officials headed by executive vice president J. F. Donlin, made an inspection trip over the Scranton Division from Mayfield yard to Cadonia and then to Maybrook. No further mention is made in newspapers of Rosoff until this quip appeared in the New York Times on May 19, 1950:

"Samuel R. Rosoff, the subway builder, said he intended to submit to Federal Judge Edward A. Conger a bid on the bankrupt New York, Ontario & Western Railroad. His interest in acquiring the 550 miles of road between Weehawkin, N.J. and Oswego, N.Y., he said, was connected with installing a monorail road above the present right of way.

The Utica Daily Press on June 1, 1950 noted that Rosoff was "conspicuously absent, and was "out of town" and not represented when bids were opened in Federal Court the previous day. Cash offers came from the Lew Frank Industrial Corp. of Rochester for \$2,448,000; and \$2,500,000 from H. E. Salzberg Co. which owned the Unadilla Valley, headquartered in New Berlin, and the Southern New York in Oneonta.

Earlier, it was learned that Rosoff was going to offer \$4 million. But the railroad bondholders soundly rejected all any offers, claiming they didn't " even come close to covering the railroad's debts. In the court transcript for Feb 1, 1950, it listed as present Samuel Rosoff, representing the New Haven Railroad. The court asked if the New Haven is present, and Rosoff (not mentioning the New Haven at all) said that he has investigated and studied the whole O&W and then said what looks to me like double talk.

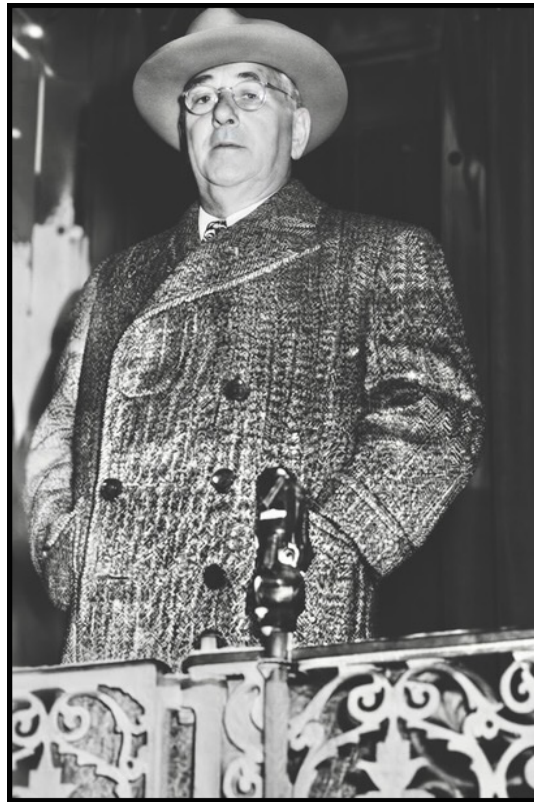
He then said that he would like 6 months more time. Elbert Oakes, attorney for the Trustees, asked if 4 months would do, and Rosoff said that would be better than nothing. Rosoff said "There are a lot of people who are interested in the road besides myself, and we are trying to save the road". Oakes asked if that meant other bidders, and Rosoff said "Yes. We are ready to operate, not destroy it."

That was the last ever heard from Rosoff. He died on April 9, 1951 at the age of 67 at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland after undergoing surgery for a "chronic intestinal condition." A note at the end of his obituary published in the Utica Daily Press the following day, said:

"He became interested in buying the bankrupt Ontario and Western Railroad and made an inspection tour in 1949, stopping at Utica and other local points on the line but dropped out of the picture when directors decided to try for new business."

Thus ended the story of Sam Rosoff's efforts to save the New York, Ontario & Western Railroad that managed to survive another seven years

under difficult circumstances.



Sam Rosoff aboard Car 30. He was always a very sharp dresser. Utica & Mohawk Valley Chapter, NRHS.



Special NYO&W train on Fay street near Lafayette street in Utica. Utica & Mohawk Valley Chapter, NRHS.



Special NYO&W train in Utica. Utica & Mohawk Valley Chapter, NRHS.