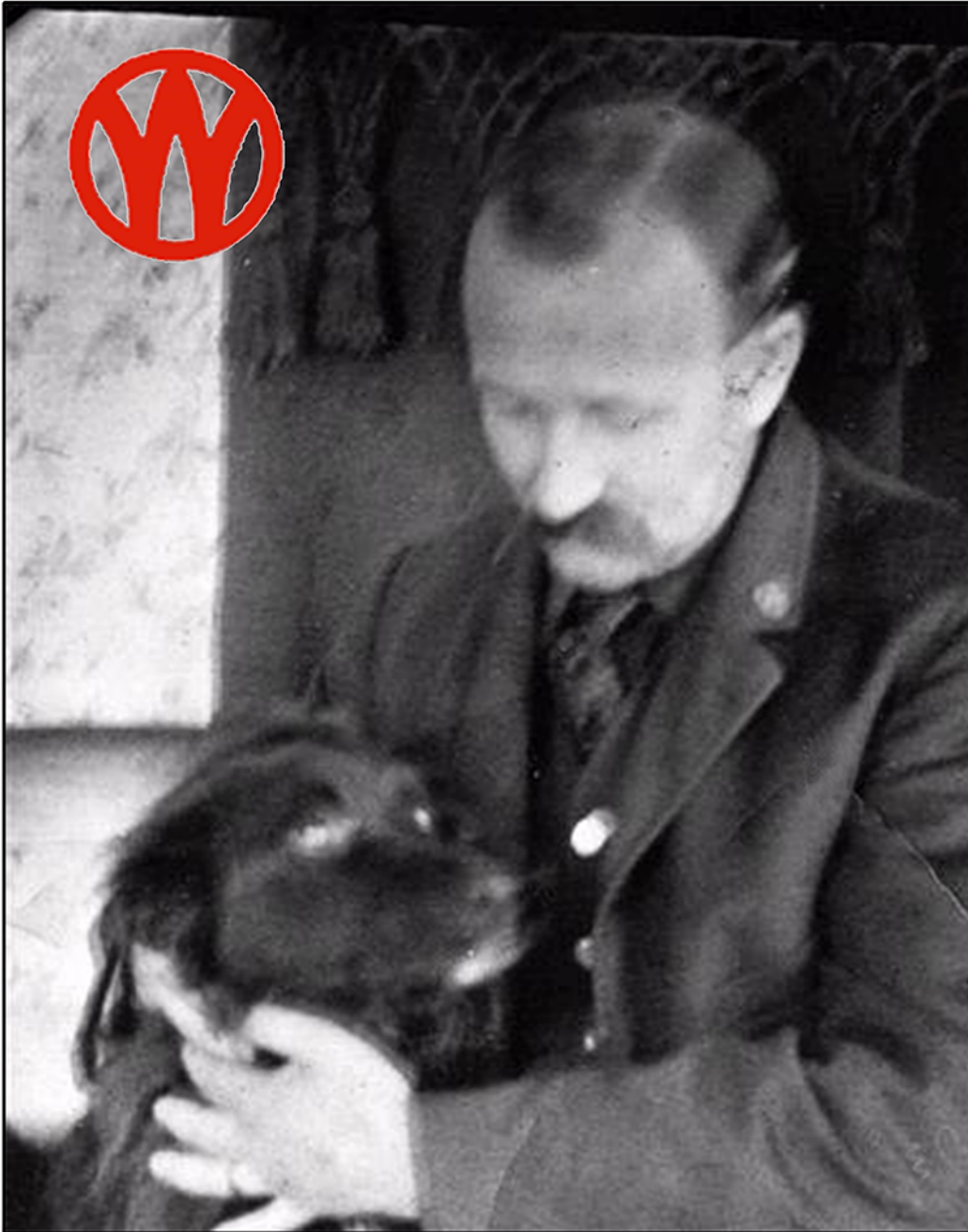


Digging Deeper With Doug Ellison
Number 2 in a Series
Northern Division Roots

The O&W has always been “my road” in spite of the fact that I wasn’t born until 1959, a short time after her rails were torn up. But, you have to understand that within that railroad, the Northern division anyway, were and are my roots. You see, there were O&W railroaders on both sides of my family, and for some reason my path and that of the O&W keeps intersecting.

My Great-grandfather started on the O&W about 1908 was an operator up on the Northern Division. His proper name was John James Whalen, whose parents had come to Hamilton from Ireland. To one and all he was known as Jay.



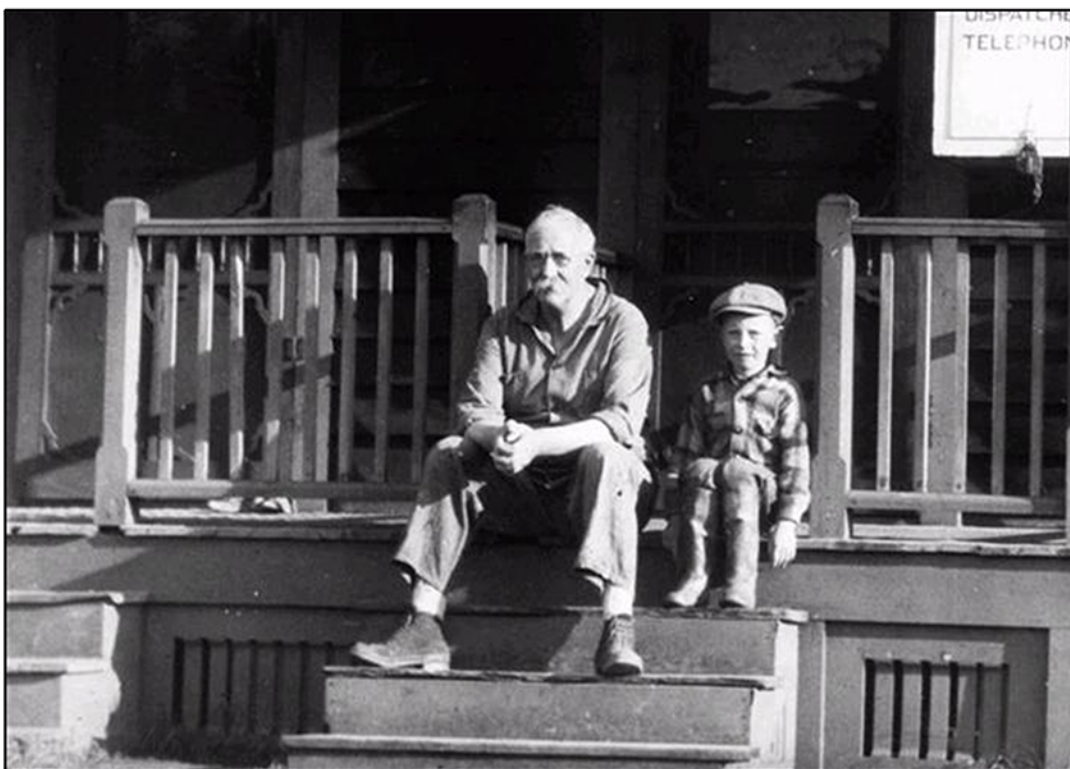
Jay Whalen and dog about 1909

Among the stations he worked were Hamilton, Whites Corners, Pecksport, Randallsville, Deansboro and Summit.



Summit Station – from Clyde Conrow

I am sure there must have been more. He died in 1947, but I was fortunate enough to have two of his two daughters live in our back yard. After my Grandfather John Ellison died, my grandmother Margaret Whalen Ellison and her unmarried sister Marion came to reside in a trailer behind our house in Earlville, NY just a little more than a football field away from the Erie Lackawanna's Utica to Binghamton branch. Indeed, one of my earliest memories is of train whistles. My grandmother and my aunt were not at all reluctant to tell stories of their youth and of the times they spent with their father on the O&W. They lived in Hamilton on what then was called Main Street, but now known as Lebanon Street. Their back yard was the O&W and the Leland's Coal Shed. They both were no strangers to the O&W, and the railroaders who worked on her.



Jay Whalen and son John pose for a picture during the Summer of 1927.



Hamilton, NY CA 1923. That's Leland's in the background. My grandmother Margaret Whalen is at rear center, Aunt Marion Whalen who would soon become the young Summit Operator is in rear at right and John James Whalen, Jr. ("Unc" to me) is front right. The Whalen kids are in their back yard.

One story concerned their monthly trips to Utica for shopping. Seems one time nearing Christmas either the regular passenger train was full, or they managed to somehow miss it. Well, Grandpa Whalen got them a ride over to the yards at Canal Branch where they hopped a caboose on a freight train. It was apparently quite a long and tiring adventure as the train stopped frequently to switch on the way south. My aunt did mention that she was happier when the regular steam train was taken off and the "Toonerville Trolley" substituted. She would tend to get very motion sick as the passenger car swayed and rocked from side to side and the coal smoke came wafting through. The little Toonerville Trolley was much cleaner and had a cute bounce to it that she much enjoyed.

During the Summer of 1927, my grandfather bid a job at Summit, between Oxford and Guilford after working at Randallsville where he would frequently ride a rail bike to work. At various times the two youngest kids Marion who was 14 at the time and her brother John James Whalen, Jr. (John) would be down there staying with him for periods of time. Older sister Margaret was grown and married, so was otherwise preoccupied in Hamilton. Margaret however must have been down there at some earlier date as she was well versed in the area and had a number of her own stories to tell, however I do not know at what period nor how many trips she may have made. Well, Marion took to railroading like a duck to water, even at age 14. She frequently would OS the trains over the telephone to the dispatcher's office in Norwich and knew most of those guys by name, if not by face as she could rattle them off years later. She and my grandmother also knew the Wilson's, who were a husband and wife team of operators there, as they spoke of them fondly. I wish I could recall all the stories my aunt would tell, of laying in bed upstairs and listening to the train crews coming and going from the office, the pushers turning back, the headlight of the steamers lighting up her room at night and the sounds of the panting and hissing locomotives impatient to be moving down the road as the heavy footsteps of crews echoed from the wooden floors and muted voices discussed the work at hand. On one trip north, Marion was with her father and they stopped off at the Norwich Dispatcher's Office. When they entered, the men of course knew Jay, and one of the guys spoke out and said about my aunt "well and here we must have the new Summit operator !" I think my aunt was always pretty proud of that. My great-grandmother Martha Whalen was at Summit once and again, perhaps to deliver one or the other children and pick the other up. While there in 1927 she decided that the area could

use some more of a homier ambience and planted some daffodils.

The Whalen kids playground in Hamilton included the O&W, coal shed area but I think not the shed itself, the old milk station across the tracks and other nearby places like Woodlawn Cemetery a popular sledding hill across the street. Back then they walked to the old Broad Street school, now the site of a bank building near the southeast corner of the village green. This meant four trips across the O&W tracks at minimum as they would go home for lunch in those days before school cafeterias. My aunt distinctly remembered this ritual on account of a tragic O&W incident, which occurred on March 11, 1926 three days after her 13th birthday. A northbound train was coming into town with a W Class 2-8-0 when it apparently split the milk station switch with the tender, flipping the engine over on it's side. This happened at night and was right behind their house and made a lot of noise. Suddenly there were the sounds of voices downstairs. Seems for some reason the crew ran into their house for help. The crews knew Grandpa and where he lived, and perhaps thought that was their best course of action. The engineer was Jesse Harding, Jesse bid off road jobs after that and settled into working the Utica yard job. He remained a frequent visitor to the Whalen home for some years. My aunt recalls one of the brakeman stopping by much later and recounting how when he "came to" after the wreck that his neck was laying on the rail and he opened his eyes to look up at a car wheel. Another 8 inches and he would have been decapitated. She recalled how for a long time after he would wake up screaming in the night after having nightmares about it. Her vivid memory of the wreck was compounded by the fact that the next morning the locomotive was emitting a shriek from the escaping steam from the whistle. It could she said be heard all the way over to the school. My Aunt Marion retained much of what she saw on the railroad and how it operated. She could explain how trains and tracks were handled in very specific operating detail at Summit, and a good general understanding of operations in general. Years later she would manage to find trains in many of her travels to tell her young teen aged nephew about, and really enjoyed seeing good heads up operations. One time in later years she was watching a tie gang at Earlville on the NYS&W. The foreman asked her what she thought, and I think he must have gone into shock as she told him flat out in a rather uncomplimentary way and with specific detail of what they were doing wrong (apparently there were some tie plate lips under the base of the rail, and some bent over spikes). She was at this time about 70 years old ! It was my Aunt Marion who encouraged my railroad interests and became a frequent sight throughout Central New York trackside and known by many of the train crews on the Erie Lackawanna. It was also happened that she worked with a nurse named Suzie Reeder at Oneida City Hospital and that is how I met her husband the renown O&W fan and neighbor to the Munns Depot, Sam Reeder.

In 1977, Aunt Marion and I visited the site of the Summit Station, and while I was poking about looking for spikes and other railroad related items I heard her gasp and exclaim "My word !, those are the daffodils Mom planted in 1927 !" Sure enough, there were beautiful flowers blooming and my aunt had remembered the day she and her mother planted them. To her, it was a sort a of coming home connection to the past.



"My word !, those are the daffodils Mom planted in 1927!" Great Grandma Whalen's Daffodils at Summit. A return to 1927 for my Aunt Marion.

After my grandmother Margaret Whalen married John Ellison, they resided for a while just down the street from the Whalen's at what has become known to most O&W fans as the Monty Johnson house. Yes, that should ring a bell, as it was in Monty Johnson's garden that FT 803 landed when it became engaged in the Flying Diesel Corps in 1955. Us Ellison's tend to think of it as the John Ellison house and adjacent blacksmith shop. To my dad, it is the place he was born, and where he lived the first few years of his life.



The John A. Ellison home where my father John Jay Ellison was born in 1932. The back yard of this home was where FT 803 would land far into the future in 1955. The coal shed is barely visible to the left. – And yes the middle name is after O&W operator and grandfather Jay Whalen.

Now if that is not enough, within the same area and on Kendrick Ave and various times lived my Grandfather Ellison's brothers and sisters; Sam, George, Great Grandma Jemimah Ellison, Mayme (Bradley) and Frank Ellison. In fact Sam lived right where the new Hamilton firehouse now stands at the corner of Lebanon Street and the O&W.



Mildred Ellison (Waters) my Uncle Sam's daughter in her backyard on Lebanon Street in 1945. Note the O&W depot in the background. Her aunts and uncles most all lived nearby. Millie married the boy across the street, Ernie Waters in a surprise ceremony, at least a surprise to her parents whom she sent on an errand while the minister came over ! This is now the site of the new Hamilton Fire Hall.

My dad doesn't have much memory of the O&W in Hamilton, but in the late 1930's they lived in Smyrna and the area down by the tracks had a draw for youngsters to play at the old abandoned depot to explore and walk the tracks to the bridge or hang out by the milk station (where Grandpa Ellison worked for a while)



My dad, John Ellison with his mother Margaret Whalen Ellison with the ever present O&W and Leland's Coal Shed as a background. Summer, 1932.

My dad recalls riding the cab of several NW-2's switching cars there and of visiting a caboose on a work detail that was left on the siding one summer serving as a home to one of the workman. He also remembers almost getting hit by a train at the "bottom of the dugway" (Route 80) one night and of the infamous collision between a train and a milk tanker that happened one summer in the mid- 1940's and literally stunk up the whole town for days and is still recalled by older Smyrna residents. Dad tried hiring out to the local section gang when he graduated in 1950, but Mr. Marino didn't need any new help.



Dynamiting the ice jam at Smyrna, NY looking north towards the depot in 1939, the year my dad moved there and started hanging around. – from Martha Whalen. John Ellison Collection.

On my mother's side it was my Uncle by marriage Joe Merlino that gives the O&W connection. Uncle Joe worked the car department at Norwich from sometime in the 1940's till the end in 1957. He really loved the O&W and railroading in general. Once one of my cousins' said that when the O&W shut down it broke his heart. He passed away in 1974, but I do think a part of him did die in 1957. When I was a kid and visited him and Aunt Dawn at the house in Norwich which looked out over the yards at Clinton Street, he would walk the dog and stop off at the Ontario and the bar next door and meet up with his O&W buddies. At that time (late 1960's) the Ontario was filled with old O&W guys, many needing little encouragement to talk about the old days. His daughter Jeanette remembers as a very young girl riding the caboose with her father to Oneida and hanging out for the day. Uncle Joe for a while had to work up there, and took my cousin Jeanette with him. See really liked those rides and fondly remembers them to this day. In fact, although not a railfan she is very much an O&W girl at heart, it is "her road" also.



That is Uncle Joe Merlino in top photo front left-center, and at bottom far left in his O&W days. Bottom photo is "the bar next to the Ontario". O&WRHS Collection.

The other connection on my mothers side is rather indirect, but perhaps unique. Her aunt and uncle Margaret and Homer Boise lived on a farm just south of the "flat iron" between Wilbers and Sherburne Four Corners with the O&W in their back pasture. Seems when Uncle Homer bought a television the reception he got was terrible, except when train passed by, then the picture came in great ! Bet there was one guy who wished the O&W was busier !!

When the 803 plunged through the coal shed at Hamilton both my Uncle Tom (mothers brother) and father went up to see the wreck. At that time they did not know each other. Uncle Tom recalls hearing one of the

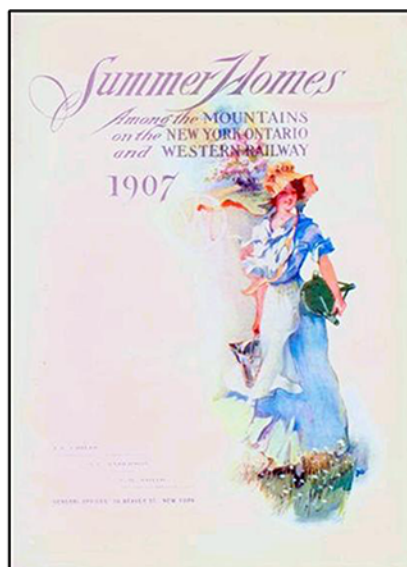
train crew discussing the incident. I suspect it was Roadforeman Fred Lewis as Uncle Tom married Aunt Sybil on September 25, 1955 and they went on a short New England honeymoon. Therefore it would have been towards the later part of the cleanup before he could have been at the scene. In any event, he heard the gentleman say "It was dark and raining like hell, then it stopped raining and we went through the other end" He still laughs about that.



FT 803 lies in my dad's old back yard in Hamilton, now owned (1955) by Monty Johnson. Bill Wilcox photo.

One thing Uncle Tom also did at this time was he worked for Cossitt Concrete at Randallville, NY. They had a big loading elevator and he said one could climb to the top and look south down the O&W tracks almost to Earlville and get a great view of the trains. Too bad he didn't take a camera. By the way, he probably got the idea from climbing up the big tall Moses Feed elevator at Earlville before it burned. He said the view from that up the track was incredible!

This was the atmosphere I was born into in 1959. For some reason I seemed to always have known about the O&W. It was just a part of our family fabric. I always envisioned the O&W as a human entity. Although the nickname "Old Woman" doesn't sit well, it still seems to fit the railroad in its later years. I like to think of her in her prime when she was Tom Fowler's girl, and she was something !



Miss O&W - She was a pretty young thing in her youth, Tom Fowler's Girl and full of life. (Thomas Powell Fowler was President of the O&W from 1885-1912). O&WRHS Collection

Hauling passengers, coal, milk and merchandise and making some good money. She was a pretty good looker in her youth, and in particular I like to think of her as the young milk-maid in the 1907 Summer Homes brochure, young, vibrant and loving life. After her master Mr. Fowler retired, it seemed to be either a status quo or downhill. Even Mr. Lyford's sleek new diesels couldn't turn back the clock to those happy days of her youth. Truth be told also, if one were to hear an A-B-B-A set of F's hitting the grade at Guilford with heavy tonnage on SU-1 for Norwich, one would be hard pressed to call her "Old & Weary. Sixty-four cylinders pumping out 5400 horsepower, exhaust reverberating off the hillside and surrounding buildings and plenty of sand hitting the rails making a cloud that obscures the running lights as the O&W made revenue ton miles per train hour at 10:30 pm rocking and thundering the nighttime stillness. A Time Freight with a sense of desperation.

That was some of the magic I tried in vain to find as a youngster with my cousin Roger as we walked mile after mile of the abandoned right of way in the 1960's. It looked from the very visible skeletal remains that the scrap train must be just around the next bend. We walked around many bends, but the elusive scrap train was no where to be found and the smell of death permeated the air. We were sad, for we wished to meet the Old Woman, but she was gone.



All we could find were her skeletal remains. South of Earlville in pursuit of the Scrap Train.



Our elusive scrap train had vanished around the bend way back of sundown by the time we walked the Old Woman's path in the 1960's. Here it was caught at the Route 5 crossing in Kirkland, NY in 1958 pulling up the Rome Branch. Signal Maintainer Gus Kervin kept the flashers in ship shape here in O&W operating days lest there be an altercation. Karl Korbel photo. Doug Ellison collection.



Lelands Coal Shed and Ramp – December, 1976. No longer will FT diesels roar up the ramp at 30 plus mph in full emergency and fly out the other side.



Borden's Earlville, NY on NYO&W "down in the hole" As a kid, I played around here after the building was abandoned. It fell down during the Winter of 1969-1970.



That's me on the left and Cousin Roger Hartshorn on the right, September 1970 just before we went to Hancock, NY to the O&W Old Timers picnic and met Robert F. Harding.

My neighbor in Earlville, Monte Bennett told of how he was in school in early 1958 when the scrap train came into town to lift the rails. It was warm at that time, and the big windows were open in the old school building a quarter mile or so to the east of the tracks. Close enough that that he could hear the screeching of the rails being loaded into the gons. She didn't go quietly, but she went with dignity. Just think about it, she played a high stakes game with the "big boys". She went up against the mighty New York Central and the Erie with some of the hottest manifests in the east delivering produce and meat to Boston.

She played the game with her life. Regardless of rate agreements or anything else, woe be it for NE-4 to be late or miss it's connection. Performance counted, and by looking at the Middletown dispatcher sheets and their "speed writing" notes it was evident that the O&W had people who knew how to think and move trains. On her old worn rails she made a good show day after day with dedicated people. I conjure the image of her in an old tattered and worn dress, her body thin and frail, but yet erect and proud, doing to the best of her ability, like Mr. Fowler would have wanted no matter how tired and worn.



A north bound switches at Solsville about 1955. Just visible to the left of the brakeman is a flanger sign that Cousin Roger would find in the weeds in 1971 and drag home to Bouckville. Bill Wilcox photo.



Sixteen years after the 127 passed the flanger sign and was captured on film by Bill Wilcox, I am propping it up in this 1971 photo at Bouckville, and wearing my O&W hat.

However, March 30, 1957 would be just one day too far for her to go. For the night before Conductor Frank Eldred gave the highball for the last train to leave Norwich. It was all over. Frank told years later how women were crying and wailing, people were down to the yard, men had tears in their eyes. Few believed even then it could be over, including the Trainmaster Tom Natoli and Operator Ray McElligott .

When Middletown Dispatcher T.B. Girard gave the the last train order by telegraph his closing words ended an era. Those simple words in morse short hand were "Good Night". In essence they were the last official words of the Old Woman she ended it all with a simple "good night" and exited stage left with her head held high as Frank Eldred took the train into the night on it's final journey.



Frank Eldred rides the side of diesel 807 at Cadosia about 1954. David Connor photo. Doug Ellison Collection.



Conductor Frank Eldred – O&W Veteran closes his career at Norwich, NY on Conrail as he signs off for the last time after bringing in Train 214 on February 19, 1981. "Hey there, we are on the pit at ..." Just visible to the right of the phone is a copy of an "O&W Observer" Twenty four years after 1957 the memories were still strong.

Over the years I have met many fine O&W railroaders, including Frank Eldred who incidently taught me the ropes as a brakeman when I hung around the EL / Conrail at Norwich. I have been fortunate to have been on O&W 116 and 111, the 111 was owned by my one time employer OmniTRAX. While on the Adirondack Scenic Railroad as Executive Director I was fortunate to have brought 44 tonner 105 back to New York State and ran her up at Lake Placid.



Thanks to Del Button and Walter Rich On the 116 at Norwich in 1987.
Tim Wakeman photo.

It has also been a privilege to count as friends many in the O&WRHS including the late John Treen, Sam Reeder, John Taibi, Robert Mohowski, Jeff Otto, Carl Ohlson and others. I remember meeting the late Robert F. Harding and likening it to meeting God, and the same could be said for meeting William F. Helmer who wrote the first O&W Book which my Great Grandmother Whalen lived to read and hand down to me as one of my first real adult books. The book charmed me in my formative years.



Bob Mohowski at left and Doug Ellison at right welcome NYO&W 44 tonner #105 back to New York State at Lake Placid in 1997. She was a runner, and Bob and I took her for a spin later that day. Elizabeth Gray photo. Bob Mohowski Collection.

But the greatest honor came in June, 2004 when Jeff Otto contacted some retired O&W Northern Division railroaders for a little reunion in Norwich. Among them was Frank Eldred a long time friend and Gus Kervin a signal maintainer, who I had met through my affiliation with the Utica & Mohawk Valley Chapter, NRHS. After learning of the reunion, I called Frank to see if he was attending, and he asked if I were going. I said to do that I would have to take a day off from work, and that stunned him. "Work?" "Are you still working?" "How old are you now?" I replied I was only 44. "Oh GOD I am 83 ! he said. Well, by God now if you go, I'll go. When I said it was a reunion of O&W people, he said, "Well, you are one of us, you better go". Frank was well aware of the old timers I knew, and although he never knew my Great Grandfather Jay Whalen, he knew of him and knew my Aunt Marion. He also knew my Uncle Joe, who he reminded me was called "Peanuts". And I think also the fact of all the years he took me under his wing and taught me railroading and had me ride in the caboose or cleared the way for me to ride the locomotive. But to hear those words "you are one of us" was the fulfillment of all those miles walked in the '60's chasing the disappearing ghost of the Old Woman". I had finally found her alive and well in the hearts of those who worked for her and were striving in their twilight years to pass on her legacy. Frank did come to the reunion, and it was to be one of his last times out. He was too frail to get out of his car, but we all crowded around and talked to him as he reminisced. Just before he drove away we shook hands, and as he gripped my hand he looked me square in the eye, and said very deliberately and a bit hauntingly, "Stay in Touch", then he was gone wheels turning underneath him like the wheels of Caboose 8345 turned beneath him on March 29, 1957 and he disappeared into eternity just like the O&W did.



Jeff Otto's O&W reunion at Norwich in June, 2004. We are standing around Frank Eldred's car. That's me in the orange, John Taibi in shorts and Jeff at far right. Jeff Otto collection.

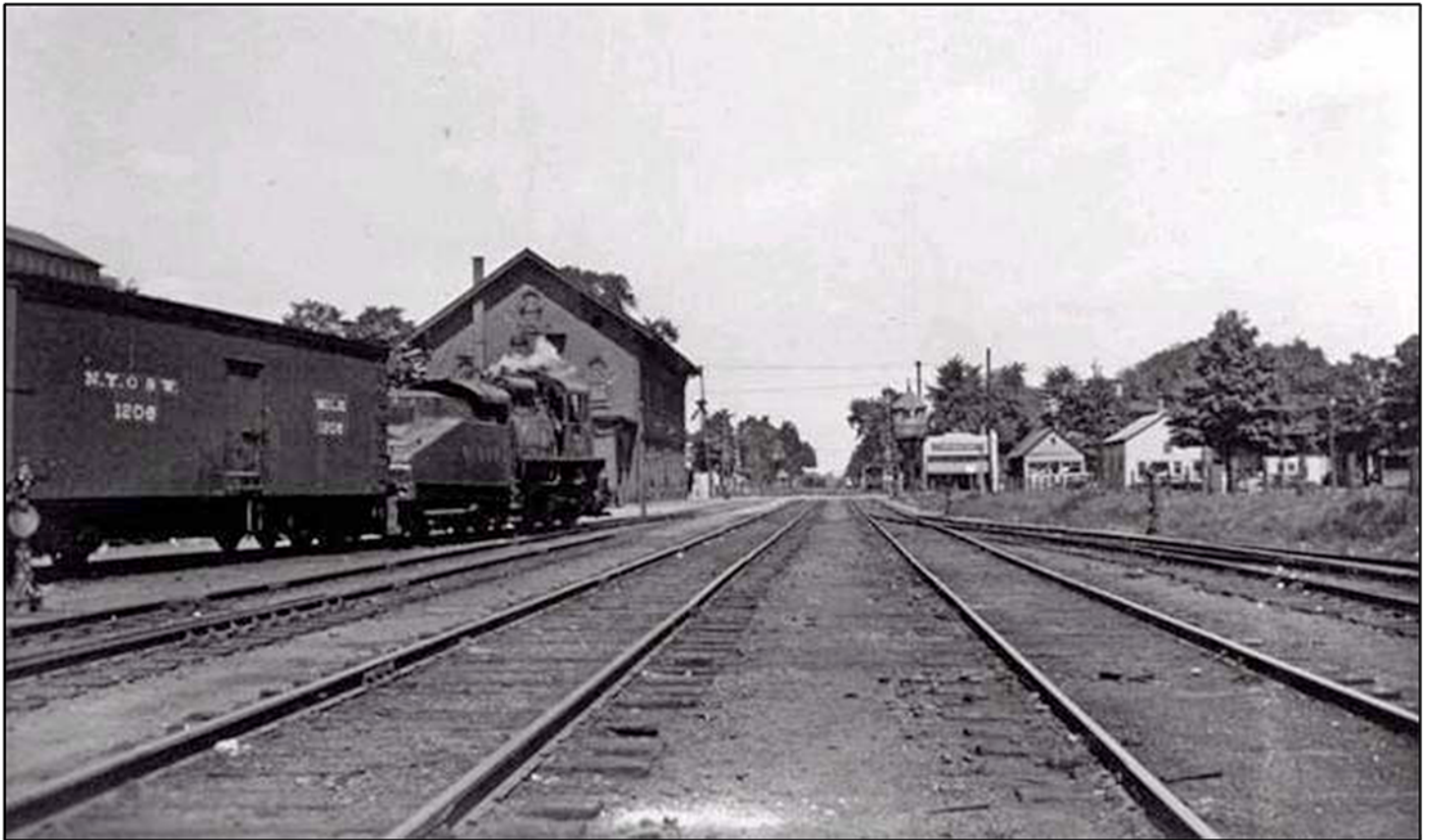
The reunion was like anytime railroaders get together. Somehow they talk a different language that can be hard for a non-railroader to comprehend or break into. For a while that day they were young again, for a brief moment the O&W lived. As Frank had done years before, Trainmen Dave Diefenbacher and Jim Paden explained how the different jobs out of Norwich worked and most important how the pay rates worked and how to fill out the time sheet ! It really felt like we were going to meet up the next day down at the yard and take out the Rome Local, coming back to reality was hard.



Learning the nuances of filling out your time slip on the Rome Local, an important part of the day and other practical advice was bestowed by former trainmen Dave Diefenbacher and Jim Paden. – Here the Rome Local with Engine 125 at Clinton does the work that earned that payroll. Karl Korbelt photo. Doug Ellison Collection



Dave Diefenbacher, Frank Archosky and Crofton Coles at the Norwich reunion in 2004. Jeff Otto Collection



O&W yard at Norwich looking north towards East Main Street. This is where many people in Norwich worked at one time, and some died here. Eilean works in the building just to the right of the crossing tower, right beside the tracks. From there you can still view scenes such as this that occurred across the street, as it is a restaurant where for the asking you can view one of their old photo albums and revisit Norwich and the O&W rail yards the way they were. Norwich still remembers her own, and still lays claim to the O&W.



The 29th of March comes down kinda hard ...three hours before the Old Woman said "Good Night" Engineer Leo Marrone and Conductor Chick Miner take the last train home to Norwich as daylight fades into a never ending night. The Hamilton depot stands silent as it passes and it does not appear Uncle Sam or Aunt Elsie came out of the house (at right) to watch it's passing either. Millie Harter photo.

Exit the Old Woman

The 29th of March comes down kinda hard when I think of her gone away. But come April when the daffodils bloom at Summit, and nature springs to life once more, I hear the Old Woman whisper in the breeze "Remember me to my loved ones, and stay in touch" The years then add up to nothing and I feel the beat of her heart deep inside me. I look at the tender yellow flowers before me and remember how a 14 year old girl and her mother planted them a fragile and living reminder from "Her" loved ones.

