

Riding The "Toonerville" On The O&W

By Arden W. Coe



The 801 at Oneida on its trial run June 27, 1925. It ran as trains 41-42 until June 24, 1929. Special Thanks to John Taibi for this amazing photo.

Arden Coe was born on February 13, 1912 to the family of Wilfred and Ethel Coe of Hastings, New York. He graduated from Parish High School, Syracuse University and Auburn Theological Seminary. Arden was a rail fan, particularly of the New York, Ontario and Western Railroad, from his early days until his passing in 2004. In his memoirs, for example, he said as a child his family took him from Central Square to Sylvan Beach and back on the O&W. What follows are a few vignettes taken from his recollections of the O & W, written in the 1990s, that pertain to the Central Square area as passed on to his son, Richard L. Coe, who wished to share them - *Richard Palmer*.

For two summers during college days I worked for the Town of Hastings Highway Department. The Oswego to Norwich local by 1929 had been reduced to a gasoline-Electric coach which was nicknamed "The Toonerville". Listed in the timetables as Train 41 northbound and 42 southbound it was due at Central Square at 5:50 pm. For several weeks our crew worked on highways near the Central Square Station. The horn of Train 42 was always welcome as we knew that quitting time was only ten minutes away. In spite of the common idea that O&W trains were always late and that Gas-Electrics were always breaking down, I do not recall a single day that summer when Train 42 was not on time.

In my last two years in college I supplied the little Congregational Church at Constantia, New York. After 1929 the only passenger service left between Oswego and Oneida was furnished by the milk train Number 9 northbound and 10 southbound. Train 10 was due at Constantia at 10:25 am. The little church only a few hundred feet from the station started its worship at 10:30 am. My recollection is that Train 10 was always on time in spite of the fact that it took on a large quantity of milk from the station at Pennellville. My parents in the earlier days of their married life often rode the train from Morse (the NYC station for Hastings) to Central Square and then Ontario & Western to Fulton. The New York Central and O&W tracks met at Central Square. Their memories were of a train usually on time even the morning and afternoon mixed train.

One memorable O&W special train that comes to mind ran from Oswego to Hamilton in March of 1932. The high school at Oswego had a championship basketball team that year and was scheduled to play

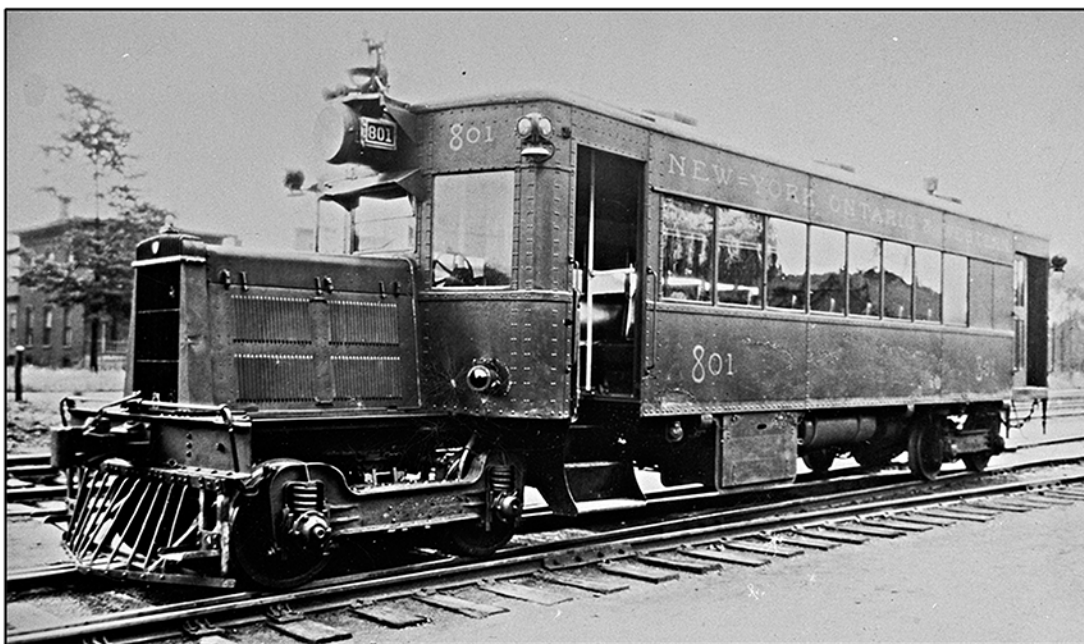
Oneonta for a state title. January and February were mild months that year in upstate New York but March was fierce with blocked highways and one blizzard after another. Basketball fever was so strong that the fans in Oswego chartered a special train on the O&W.

Eight coaches from the "great timber fleet" ran empty to Oswego and then the round trip from Oswego to Hamilton filled with happy fans made even happier by an Oswego victory. I had followed the progress of this trip in the Oswego paper and had remarked to my father that the basketball game was not my special interest, but that I would like to ride or at least see the train. This wish was granted in a most unusual way. At the time I was a commuting student at Syracuse University and lived at Hastings, some 27 miles north of Syracuse. My routine was to get up at 5:00 am; hike a mile to Oswego County Route 38 to Route 11; then a ride to downtown Syracuse. As we approached the O&W crossing of Route 11 at Central Square a flagman brought us to an abrupt stop. We were the first in a long line of cars waiting for the train to clear the crossing. At 6:30 am the special was on its way back to Middletown yards. There I was with an unhampered view of the train. How I wish I had a camera to photograph this event.

Another engineer (not named) was a gentleman with strong recollections and personal experience with the O&W. His father worked for the O&W in Oneida and, when he was about ten years old, his father was appointed agent at West Monroe, New York. The second floor of the station served as the residence for the family. He has vivid recollections of an engineer who, after the ending of the Chicago passenger trains, was the engineer on Trains 1 & 2 sometimes referred to as "The Ontario Express." He often brought magazines for the youth at West Monroe.

Another engineer noted for making up time was known on the O&W as "Cannonball" Baker. He was sometimes at the helm of Trains 1 & 2, "The Ontario Express", but more frequently with Numbers 9 & 10, the old standby milk trains. The distance by rail from the milk station at West Monroe to the milk station at Central Square is four miles. Legend has it that Baker once took Number 9 from a standing stop on the siding by the station at West Monroe to a standing stop on the siding at Central Square in exactly four minutes.

Ernest Pond, another agent of the St. Lawrence Division was for several years agent at Central Square where he served both New York Central and the Ontario and Western. The time was the 1930's and train movements on the O&W mainline between Oswego and Oneida was limited to one freight train southbound and one northbound daily plus inspection trips by O&W officials.



TRIAL TRIP OF FIRST GASOLINE PASSENGER CAR ON NORTHERN DIV., N.Y.O. & W Ry, JUNE 27, 1925.

OPERATED AS TRAIN NOS. 41 & 42 JUNE 29, 1925 TO JUNE 27, 1929, INC. WHEN TRAIN WAS DISCONTINUED.

- 1- W. A. WOOD, SUP'T.
- 2- M. FINIGAN, ROADMASTER.
- 3- W. W. DALEY, MASTER MECHANIC.
- 4- J. H. SMITH, TRAINMASTER.

- 5- J. E. POWERS, D.F.A.
- 6- G. R. INGALLS, SPL. AGT.
- 7- J. L. BREED, INSPR.
- 8- F. H. WHEELER, ELEC. FOREMAN.

CREW
Engt. Bill Haight.
Cond'r Leo Feeley.
Road Foreman of Engs. John E. Fagan,
who operated train.

PICTURE TAKEN AT ONEIDA.

