

# Oneida Daily Dispatch, Monday, April 10, 1957

## Dispatch Newsmen Is Last O&W Passenger

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History books someday may report that passenger service on the New York, Ontario & Western Railway was suspended some 10 years before the line from Weehawken, N.J., to Oswego went out of existence at 11:59 p.m., Friday, March 29, 1957. However, I was the last passenger to buy a ticket on the O&W.



Last train arrives at Oneida, March 29, 1957. Photos by the late railroad historian William F. Helmer

For \$3.94, including 52 cents of tax, I purchased a round-trip ticket from Oneida to Fulton on the last O&W train ever to make that trip. With the assist from a kindly conductor who was ending 46 years' service with the New York, Ontario & Western, I made a round trip to the end of the line at Oswego - a few miles more than my ticket called for.

I didn't have first-class passenger accommodations on this last trip of the "Old Woman." Instead, I enjoyed a comfortable ride in the caboose and for a while, in the cab of the Diesel-electric locomotive.

The last northbound O&W train to pass the old Oneida station pulled in at 7:55 a.m. Friday with Charles "Chick" Miner, 108 North Lake St., as conductor and Leo Marrone, Norwich, as engineer. It took the crew only five minutes to shunt a few cars onto a siding, then continue on its way toward the Oswego terminal. The cars left in the Oneida yards were destined for transfer to the nearby New York Central tracks.

When the train eased out of the yards and across the Sconondoa St. crossing, it must have been the shortest regularly-scheduled train ever to head up the O&W mainline. It consisted only of a two-unit Diesel-electric locomotive and a small red caboose.

There was a dismal air about the caboose as the little train picked up speed on tracks paralleling North Lake St., then passing under the New York State Thruway and crossing Oneida Creek. The sky was overcast and raindrops began to sprinkle against the caboose windows as the train lost a little speed climbing an elevation leading to the bridge over the Erie Canal north of Durhamville.

Also in the caboose on the trip northward was George Cavanaugh, a native Oneidan who had been a brakeman on the Utica branch of the O&W. He made his last trip as a crew member on that branch the previous day and was riding to Oswego as a passenger to recall memories of the days when he worked on the mainline.

### **Crosses Barge Canal**

Cavanaugh jumped from his seat to wave a man in a field near the Fish Creek Landing road. The train's speed decreased to 15 miles an hour as it crossed the old bridge over the Barge Canal at Sylvan Beach; the bridge the highway bridge clearly was visible.

Further along, there was evidence of an old roadbed which left the m mainline to serve Sylvan Beach but the tracks long ago had been removed. The mainline passes behind the cottages along the Oneida Lake shore, but heavy fog made it impossible to see far onto the lake.

As we crossed Route 13, big piles of ice were visible along the lake-shore, almost symbolizing to the crew that both winter and the O&W were coming to an end at the same time. As the train picked up a little speed, Cavanaugh pointed out that track in that area had been repaired only last Fall.

It still was dreary outside, but men inside the warm caboose now were reading the morning newspapers in search of a story which might tell them the O&W had been given a new lease on life. They normally sit up there and look along the train to watch for "hot boxes" and derailments. But Friday, the two hits of the locomotive were all they had to watch.

The rest of the trains crew was seated comfortably on four benches which line the walls of then little office on wheels. Colorful calendars imprinted with railroad scenes decorated the walls, but the calendar pads had long since disappeared from most of them.

The sun was starting to peep through an overpass sky, and it was not necessary for the men to light the kerosene lanterns to read their papers. We now were passing a pretty wooded area marked with stately white Birches and the conversation in the caboose began to flow a little more freely.

### **Familiar Landmarks**

As the telegraph poles besides the track - dotted with their green and white insulators - ticked off the miles, the trainmen took long looks at familiar landmarks: the cemetery near Cleveland crossing, the school at Cleveland and a trim white church with another graveyard.

Although these men had been working since early morning, when the train left Norwich, much of the rest of the country was just beginning its day. Children were scurrying into the school from a bus stopped nearby. Chickens and ducks in a farmyard nodded "good morning" as the train passed. A man in a car at a rural crossing gave to hearty waves to the passing train.

As we passed a fish hatchery and a cluster of homes at Constantia, someone pointed out, "everybody seems to know this is the last trip." Yet the reception on this trip was nothing compared to what it would be a few hours later when the same train would make the return trip over this same track.

One by one, the crew members introduced themselves. Besides the engineer and conductor, they were Flagman Edward Swertfager, Trainmen P. E. Osborne and A. J. Natoli and Fireman William Fleming, all of Norwich.

For the first time, electric signals along the road blinked on as we neared Central Square, where the O&W tracks cross the New York Central's at a right-angle grade crossover.

The station agent at Central Square was the only one remaining between Oneida and Fulton; but at one time there many stations along the way: Durhamville, State Bridge, Sylvan Beach North Bay, West Vienna, Cleveland, Bernhard's Bay, Constantia and West Monroe.

As we neared Fulton, we passed a long siding at Pennellville but there were no longer cars on the siding and the rails had grown rusty. Familiar landmarks were the muckland farms and a switch where the New York Central tracks from Syracuse cut into the O&W line.

### **End of Run**

A black dog dashed up to greet the train as it pulled into Fulton. It was only a few minutes before we were in Oswego - the end of the line.

for the last time by Roundhouse Foreman John Sullivan and Car Inspector Francis Serow. Sullivan had been with the railroad 37 years and Serow 33 years. Sullivan's grandfather and father also had been employees while Serow's father and son have worked on the same road.

The locomotive was number 805 and the caboose, which waited alone on a siding, was number 8345. Men at the end of the line said the two units of the locomotive weighed 229 tons. They are owned by the Central Hanover Bank and Trust Co. of New York, not by the bankrupt railway.

After the inspection was completed, I was invited to take the throttle of the giant General Motors locomotive to ease it out of the repair barn on its last trip south. I truthfully can say I drove the last engine out of the Oswego terminal.' The return trip was a little different. Most of the tension of the crew had been released during the stop-over at the end of the line and it was a happy ride back.

We picked up 19 empty cars at Fulton for return to the railway's headquarters at Middletown. We also picked up two "dead" switch engines which had been used at the Fulton yards. Another empty car remained to be coupled on at Bernhard's Bay - then the rest of the trip would be just a ride back to Norwich, where the crew was to go off duty.

### **Look Different**

But things looked different now. Scores of persons lined the tracks most of whom took pictures and all of them waved.

Automobiles were lined up at crossings so people could have a last look at the train some called "Old & Weary." Some persons must have waited at trackside for hours to make sure they didn't miss the final trip.

The Diesel's bell and air whistle combined to sing a swan-song at every crossing. There were few dry eyes. Somewhere along the way I left the caboose and rode for awhile in the engine. This time the fireman was at the controls and Engineer Marrone was at the window looking toward familiar homes along the way. Every now and then he called, "Good-bye ... so long, everybody."

The 114-mile round trip from Oneida to Oswego was completed at 4:20 p.m.

As the last train peeked under the underpass which carries the New York Central Railroad tracks over the O&W., we could see the "welcoming committee" at the Oneida station. There were more automobiles at the

Members of the conductor's family were on hand to greet him. A handful of persons, including Station Agent William J. Sheehan of Munnsville, were taking pictures.

### **Photographers Busy**

There was little reason to stop at Oneida. But the train stopped anyway, to accommodate the photographers. It even backed up then continued ahead again so I could take the picture printed on the front page of today's edition of The Oneida Daily Dispatch.

When the train pulled out at 4:35 p.m., it would seem that the story of the last trip of the O&W had ended. But it was not quite over as yet.

In the excitement of the picture-taking and well-wishing at the station, somebody forgot to pick up the last batch of company mail destined for Middletown. The agent later arranged for the mail to be taken to Norwich by car, and from there to Middletown on the train.

It didn't take long for the crowd to disperse and for Sheehan to lock the station for the last time. I went back there today and there were no automobiles, no people - no trains.

It looked as though the weeds already were starting to grow up through the railroad ties . . .

Everyone knew now that there would be no more trains.

\*Passenger service between Oneida and Oswego with the motor car was discontinued June 27, 1929 and the milk train, #9 and #10 discontinued carrying passengers December 15, 1931.

