

Commuter Trains to Sidney - A World War II Experience

By Richard Palmer



Interior of magneto assembly area at Scintilla plant in Sidney. Sidney Historical Society.

Thousands of men and women provided the work force at the Scintilla plant in Sidney during World War II. This factory in Sidney produced large quantities of magnetos and components used in military fighter planes such as B-17's, B-25's, P-40's and P-51 Mustangs. Some workers traveled long distances from as far away as Binghamton, Norwich, Oneonta, Cadosia and Walton in all kinds of weather because it offered job opportunities in an area hard hit by the depression. The Scintilla plant, a division of Bendix Aviation, was conveniently located adjacent to the Delaware & Hudson and New York, Ontario & Western railroads.

Although the D&H was unable accommodate commuters due a shortage of passenger equipment, the O. & W. offered to do what it could to ease the situation. On March 20, 1942, A. E. Tompkins, general passenger agent of the New York, Ontario & Western Railway, met with Gordon R. Ingalls, president of the Norwich Chamber of Commerce, regarding the need for suitable public transportation for Scintilla workers living in the Norwich area. Due to the war effort there had been discussion of restoring some of the lost passenger service on various parts of the line. Agencies favored trains over buses. The Norwich City Council tabled requests from bus operators for franchises that might discourage the railroad from providing the service. Regular passenger service on the Northern Division of the O & W. had ceased in the early 1930s and its sole surviving passenger service north of Sidney was an old wooden combination baggage and passenger car attached to the milk train that made a daily round trip between Sidney and Oneida. It was known as Trains #9 and #10. This milk run could not be considered as a commuter train. It ceased carrying passengers on December 1, 1944. Long before, it had been a through train to Oswego but was discontinued between Oneida and Oswego on December 15, 1931.

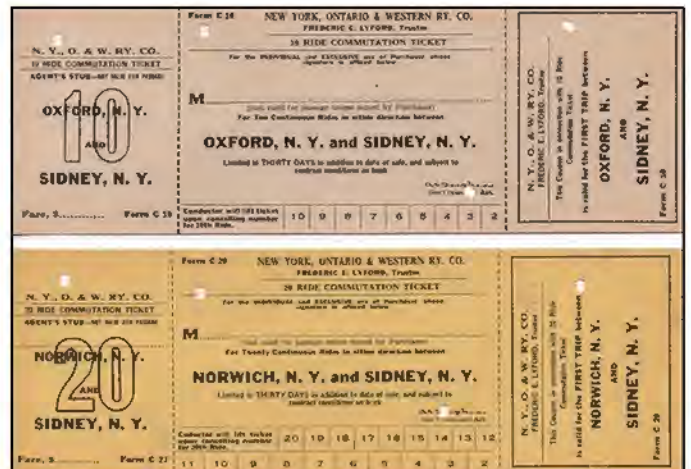
By early 1942 more than 4,000 people worked at Scintilla, commuting by private vehicles and buses. At first, a survey found the numbers didn't justify establishing train service. Gasoline rationing was officially established on July 22, 1942. Much planning went into getting the commuter trains up and running. Railroad officials worked closely with the U.S. Office of Defense Transportation, New York State Public Service Commission, and other agencies. It was estimated that the trains would get at least 140 cars off the highways daily; and save 14,000 gallons of gasoline and 210,000 tire miles a month. No supplemental gas was allotted by the Ration Board for cars carrying workers to and from their jobs at Scintilla unless the working hours did not coincide with the train schedule. Sufficient gas would be allotted to allow workers to drive to the nearest railroad station to board the train.

It wasn't until January 20, 1943 that a commuter train went into operation. To encourage train travel the Chenango County War Transportation Committee, responsible for this program, would not approve applications for bus permits to Sidney that directly competed or duplicated service provided by the railroad. Also, Scintilla workers needed to conserve gas rationing coupons for other uses. The war put a crimp in their lifestyles. Chief promoter of the new passenger service was John B. Meola of Norwich, Chenango county's Assistant Director of Civilian Protection and chairman of the county's War Transportation Committee. He had acted in a similar capacity during World War I. Up to that time the O. & W. was viewed more as an operating railroad museum rather than a modern railroad. Several 1907 vintage wooden coaches pulled by old steam locomotives. Also, by then most of its rural stations had been closed and people had to wait outside for trains. But inadequate as it might seem, the commuter trains were the best alternative. The Delaware & Hudson Railroad and the O. & W. shared the station in Sidney. After detraining there the workers walked to the Scintilla plant, less than a quarter of a mile away.

The first trial run of the commuter train rattled successfully out of Norwich at 1:45 p.m. on January 22, 1943 with 131 passengers aboard. New York, Ontario & Western Trustee Frederic E. Lyford himself was on aboard. At the end of the run he said he was pleased not only with the patronage but with the train's capability to coincide with shift changes. The engineer on the first train was States Ray, with Charles McGuire as conductor. Other crewmen regularly assigned to this train included engineers Chester Phillips, fireman George Osterhout, conductors William Gould and trainman George Hitchcock. Tickets could be purchased at the stations in Norwich, Sidney and Guilford and at Day's Drug Store in Oxford; or on the trains. The 10-trip fare commutation ticket between Norwich and Sidney was \$3.50. A 20-round trip fare was \$5 and good for 30 days.



Map showing route of Scintilla commuter train. Prepared by Doug Ellison.



Commutation tickets for the O.& W. Scintilla Special. Collection of Walter Kierzkowski

Norwich—Sidney—Walton—Cadosia						
READ DOWN			Eastern War Time	READ UP		
Daily Exc. Sun. 50	Daily Exc. Sun. 52	Daily Exc. Sun. 54		Daily Exc. Sun. 51	Daily Exc. Sun. 53	Daily Exc. Sun. 55
			STATIONS			
AM 5 45	PM 1 45	PM 9 45	Lv Norwich ... Ar	AM 8 07	PM 4 07	AM 12 07
F 6 03	F 2 03	F 10 03	" Oxford ... "	F 7 53	F 3 53	F 11 53
F 6 18	F 2 18	F 10 18	" Guilford ... "	F 7 39	F 3 39	F 11 39
F 6 22	F 2 22	F 10 22	" Parker ... "	F 7 35	F 3 35	F 11 35
6 37	2 37	10 37	Ar Sidney ... Ar	7 20	3 20	11 20
7 20	3 20	11 20	Lv ... Lv	6 40	2 15	10 40
7 35	3 35	11 35	" Maywood ... "	6 27	2 03	10 27
F 7 42	F 3 42	F 11 42	" Franklin ... "	F 6 19	F 1 56	F 10 19
F 7 46	F 3 46	F 11 46	" Merrickville ... "	F 6 15	F 1 52	F 10 15
F 7 49	F 3 49	F 11 49	" Northfield ... "	F 6 10	F 1 48	F 10 10
F 8 04	F 4 04	12 04	" Walton ... "	F 5 46	F 1 35	F 9 56
F 8 13	F 4 13	F 12 13	" Beerston ... "	F 5 46	F 1 25	F 9 46
F 8 19	F 4 19	F 12 19	" Rock Rift ... "	F 5 41	F 1 20	F 9 41
F 8 28	F 4 28	F 12 28	" Apex ... "	F 5 33	F 1 13	F 9 33
8 40	4 40	12 40	Ar Cadosia ... Lv	5 20	1 00	9 20
AM	PM	AM		AM	PM	PM

Public timetable showing extent of Scintilla commuter train, June 16, 1944. Author's collection.



Scintilla plant in Sidney during World War II. Amohenol Aerospace Corporation.

These were not considered chartered trains since the general public was allowed to ride them. The Chenango Telegraph reported on January 29, 1943:

Workers are delighted with the service. It is such a favorite with them they call it Meola's Special. The coaches are warm and comfortable and one may relax with ease. Partner pitch and rummy afford diversion for many of the workers in the daily trips to and from Norwich and their place of work. Those who do not play cards, either read or smoke or take a quiet nap between trips. In fact it is a happy throng boarding the train all along the line. Some bring their lunch in pails, others carry it in paper bags and still others buy theirs at the plant cafeteria. About the busiest man on the train is the man who punches the tickets.

Alderman James W. Flanagan is the conductor on both the early morning and the afternoon trains. He keeps stepping every minute of the journey to and from but none escape him. He travels on orders and must register the time and departure even though the run is short. Flanagan also keeps a record of the numbers traveling and when he is called upon to take the cash fare of a rider it doubles his work for he must give the man a receipt and make change. Engineer Hector Wells is at the throttle of both the morning and afternoon war specials. Everett Stratton is the conductor on the evening train. Persons from Guilford and Oxford who desire to come to Norwich are among the passengers for they have considerable time in the city on arrival here before the time of departure for the return trip.

Only a few days ago a theatre party came from Guilford to Norwich on the afternoon train and returned on the evening train, giving them a stay of more than four hours in this city. It is believed the O. & W. railroad is a pioneer in being the first railroad to operate a train for war workers. Credit for this is due largely to the efforts of Mr. Meola in an effort to save gas and tires. Nearly all who went by bus or private car are now going by train to Sidney, and of the few yet remaining it is expected they soon will join the caravan of jolly workers now riding in comfort in a railroad coach."



Scintilla commuter train waiting at the D&H station in Sidney during World War II. John Taibi Collection.

Thousands clambered for jobs at Scintilla where salaries averaged 50 cents an hour for men and 35 cents for women. That may not seem like much today but back then a loaf of bread was 10 cents and a pound of coffee, 20 cents. The trains ran seven days a week, leaving Norwich at 5:45 a.m., 1:45 p.m. and 9:45 p.m., stopping at Oxford, Guilford and Parker to pick up passengers. At Guilford they were brought to the station by bus. They arrived at Sidney at 6:37 a.m., 2:37 p.m. and 10:37 p.m., walking a short distance from the station to the plant. Returning, they left Sidney at 7:25 a.m., 3:32 p.m. one 11:20 p.m., arriving at Norwich at 8:12 a.m., 4:12 p.m. and 12:12 a.m.*

Studying the timetables, one might notice the southbound run was scheduled five minutes longer on the timetable for what was called a "cushion" in case of delays. Also extra time was needed to load and unload passengers, plus slowing down to pass over the large bridges at Lyon Brook and Sidney Center. The Guilford correspondent of the Norwich Sun noted on Thursday, January 28, 1943:

"The "Commuter's Special" started on schedule Friday morning. At 6:18 a.m. to the minute the whistle was heard as the train came around the bend, approaching the station, and again at 2:18 p.m. and 10:18 p.m. Many plan to avail themselves of this service on Monday and have already bought their tickets for \$3 which are good for 30 days. The return trips are due to arrive in Guilford at 7:34 a.m., 3:34 p.m. and 11:34 p.m. They have been running 5 to 10 minutes late because the workers have to make their way to the station. Although there are still details to be ironed out, it will be a good method of transportation, not only for defense workers, but for others, for the duration." This gave workers time out to relax. The railroad distance from Norwich to Sidney was 20 miles which was run in 52 minutes."

The Norwich Sun reported on Friday, February 5, 1943:

"Thirty-seven employees from Line 40 at the Scintilla plant in Sidney traveled to this city Wednesday morning, arriving at 8:15 a.m. on the Ontario and Western's commuter special. These workers from the 'grave-yard shift' made the New Brunswick their objective where a spaghetti and chicken dinner was enjoyed. Relaxing from their strenuous labors, these employees enjoyed themselves to the limit during their brief stay in Norwich. Entertainment was featured with Tony Polero at the piano and Carl "Doc" Latham handling the drums and guitar. The workers returned early in the afternoon via the Ontario and Western, departing from here at 1:45 p.m."

By mid-July, 1943 the O. & W. trains were carrying nearly 1,000 workers daily from Norwich to Sidney. They crossed the Delaware & Hudson at GX Tower which was controlled by the D&H. The operator set the signals and controlled the "diamond," or crossover under control of the D&H dispatcher. Home signals flanked it. The O. & W. trains moved on a clear signal indication from the tower.

Soon, other communities requested rail service. Meola met with Unadilla Valley Railway officials in March, 1943 to discuss the possibility of operating a commuter train between Bridgewater and Sidney. Meola was told this was impossible as the U. V. had no passenger equipment. It had discontinued passenger service on May 4, 1930. The Delaware & Hudson turned down a request to operate commuter trains from Binghamton and Oneonta due to unavailability of equipment.

As the result of many requests from of Scintilla workers, three daily commuter trains commenced operation on the O. & W. between Cadosia via Walton to Sidney on June 9, 1943. Instead of terminating in Sidney the trains from Norwich continued on to Cadosia to pick up passengers and bring them back to Sidney. The U.S. Office of of Defense Transportation then ordered that bus transportation competing with the trains on the same route should cease immediately while the trains operated. On the timetable these were listed as trains 50, 52 and 54 southbound and 51, 53 and 55 northbound. The railroad distance from Cadosia to Sidney was 40 miles and was run between Sidney and Cadosia in an hour and 20 minutes. The average speed of the trains was about 30 miles per hour.

On July 2, 1943 the O. & W. re-established trains #3 and #4 between Cadonia and New York. It left Cadonia at 9 a.m. and arrived in Weehawken at 2:08 p.m. Northbound, it left Weehawken at 3:35 p.m. and arrived at Cadonia at 9:04 p.m. The new connection made it possible for people from Norwich and Sidney to travel by train to New York and return. The New York train consisted of seven steel coaches and two parlor cars. This train had been called the "Mountain Express" until 1930 when it was renamed the "Delaware Valley Express." It had been cut back from Sidney to Roscoe on September 4, 1930 and again renamed the "Mountain Express." It was poorly patronized and only lasted until September 5, 1943. Thereafter it only ran as far as Livingston Manor. The Delaware Republican Press noted on July 6, 1944:

"Due to the fact that most of its equipment has been pressed into war service, the O. & W. operated no extra trains for the 4th of July rush. Ordinarily several passenger trains were run as far north as Livingston Manor and Roscoe to accommodate the holiday traffic."

As the Scintilla work force declined, so did patronage on the trains from Cadonia. It had been an on again, off again situation. For several months there had been discussions and public hearings and debate about removal of the trains. The railroad said for the month of June, 1944, receipts totaled \$3,019.60 while operating expenses were slightly over \$5,600. The number of passengers dropped by 1,000 fewer passengers carried in July than in June. The Public Service Commission finally allowed discontinuance of the trains which occurred on September 6, 1944. The slack was taken up by buses. On January 1, 1945 the O&W reduced the number of commuter trains between Norwich and Sidney from three to one, Monday through Friday. This coincided with the reduction of shifts at Scintilla. Patronage had been dropping off for several weeks before the train made its last run on August 10, 1945 - the same day 4,000 people reported for work and found this notice in their pay envelopes:

"For the past two days we have received from the government procurement agency and other customer a large volume of cancellation orders. Each specified that work on these orders must stop at once. We are therefore compelled to cease normal plant operations effective today. Whatever period of time will be necessary to take the inventory of nationwide statistics will determine our next course of action. We regret it is necessary to take this step but feel sure you will understand the position which confronts us. We will notify you of your exact status at a later date."

On August 17, 1945 workers received pay checks for that week's labors. It was stated by the company management that pay checks for the week ending Aug. 18 will be mailed to the workers by August 24 unless the employees are called to work sooner. It was stated that the layoff included the production plant workers and some office staff. Not all workers received their notices Friday. The night shift did not receive their orders until they reported for duty late that afternoon. It was also understood that all employees would be paid for four hours of time in connection with their trips to the plant and return Friday. Three days later "VJ" Day occurred and gas rationing was abolished.

The war was over and as it faded into history the number of employees at Scintilla was dramatically reduced. By November 1945 the payroll had diminished to 950 workers. But after some uncertainty, peacetime orders began to flow in and the workforce numbers rebounded. The company still produced magnetos and other components for aircraft and commercial uses. By the end of 1946 employment had rebounded to 3,000 workers at Sidney. The days of commuting by train and bus had ended. Later, following mergers and corporate changes, the company evolved as Amphenol Aerospace Corporation.

Scintilla's Norwich Facility

Not all Scintilla employees had to commute far to work. On June 1, 1943 the company opened a spare parts and distribution center in the James block building at the corner of Fair and Court streets in Norwich,

leased from Arden M. Jones. It opened on June 1, 1943 and was supervised by A.W. Newton. Parts were temporarily stored there before being shipped out. This site is now (2015) the parking lot of the current Red Roof Inn in Norwich. The June, 1943 issue of the employee magazine, Scintillator, reported:

In a move to facilitate and coordinate handling of spare parts, Scintilla, on June 1st, opened a branch in Norwich, N.Y. With the increased tempo of the war effort has come a stepped-up demand for spare parts which are recognized, both by Scintilla and the government as a paramount importance in our war program. Under this new arrangement, all spare parts will be stocked, inspected and shipped direct from the Norwich Branch. Alvin W. Newton has been named Manager of the Norwich Branch. An efficient stock room organization has been set up, headed by Robert Wharton, General Foreman, ably assisted by Foreman Larry O'Brien, John Quinlivan and Percy Terpening. Army inspection is directed by Robert Wise. George Hall is the Navy Inspector. Scintilla inspection is headed by Wilbur Dickinson. Leonard Williams is in charge of billing. Jack Somerville heads the Shipping Department, assisted by Clarence Hubbard. As was done in Sidney the facility was fenced and guarded by U.S. Army auxiliary police who were armed with rifles and tear gas."

This operation lasted until it was closed on July 8, 1944. That day a farewell party for employees was held at Hand's Canasawacta Inn. Manager Newton said at the time: "All of us regret leaving because we had a fine setup and have enjoyed working and living in Norwich.

*Workers got to the stations by either driving or taking a short bus shuttle. Except for Guilford which remained opened, they had to wait outside or in the vehicles because the depots were no longer in use or were gone. Guilford closed July 24, 1951 and demolished in 1952. Norwich station closed October 29, 1939 and was sold to Norwich Knitting Company which, incidentally, was a wartime industry. It was demolished in January, 1981. Oxford depot burned down on October 5, 1931. Summit station closed on February 23, 1928. Parker station closed on July 1, 1937, although it remained standing until it finally collapsed on "June 15, 2018. New Berlin Junction station was closed on October 14, 1929.



New York, Ontario & Western station in Norwich was built in 1870 and demolished in January, 1981. It had been sold to the Norwich Knitting Company.