



## **My Time And Place With The O&W Railway** **By James N. Parrella**

I was born June 22, 1942 in Orange County, New York, to my parents Nicholas and Victoria Parrella. We lived in the community of Meadow Brook, located in the town of Cornwall. I lived in Meadow Brook from June 1942 to July 1954. My parents rented our house from Stewart and Nellie Satterly. The Satterly's had twin sons Charles and Ernest. Ernie was killed at sea in WWII. Charlie and his wife Margaret still live in Meadow Brook in the area of his parents' and grandparents old homestead. My Meadow Brook home was 0.4 miles east of the New York, Ontario & Western Railway's station on State Highway Route 94. This station's telegraph call letters were MW. The U. S. mail came to our neighborhood by way of the O&W Meadow Brook station, which also served as the local post office.

I remember one summer day about 1946 when I was 4 years old. My Mother and I went down to the station to get our mail. She let me ride my tricycle to the station along Route 94. When we were about halfway there a pedal broke off and I had to leave the tricycle by the roadside. I was afraid someone would take it before we returned, but Mother assured me that it would still be there. It was somewhat of a long walk to the station for a 4 year old, but when we got there I felt real important. Once in the station I would run to check our mailbox window. If there was mail in our box I would then go to the ticket agent's window and ask Margaret O'Neil for our mail. Margaret O'Neil was the station agent from 1943 to the closing of the station that occurred sometime in late 1948 or early 1949. Margaret lived in the top half of the station with her daughter, Ruthann. Her oldest son, Jimmy, was in military service. We took my sister Carol to the station to attend a birthday party for Ruthann. We dropped her off and picked her up but there was, not very much railroad excitement that day. I do remember the station's waiting room having a large potbelly stove and bench seats along the walls.

Outside there was a baggage wagon, a water tower and track siding with an old passenger car. I believe now that this car was in storage. There were telltales that hung on both sides of the Route 94 highway bridge that

crossed over the O&W main line tracks near the station. Behind the station there was a concrete water raceway that supplied water to the pump that was near the area of the water tower's base. I'm not sure of the exact summer, but sometime between 1945 and 1948 the Vails Gate fire department sent one of their trucks to pump water into the station's water tower. I watched with my Mother as the men put a fire hose in an opening on the front side of the tower's roof. It must have been a dry summer or the tower's pump was not working. The raceway is still there and most of the station's foundation, and one concrete footing that was for the telltale poles.

There were times my father would drive my mother, sister and me down to the station to get our mail. He would park our 1938 Businessman's Dodge Coupe in front of a barrier by the tracks, near the Route 94 overpass. Sometimes a steam freight train would be there, and my father would have to climb up and between the boxcars to get to the station. I remember this would upset my sister. Sometime during 1947 when we parked in the same location there was an O&W diesel powering the train. These engines were not like steam engines as I did not see drive rods on their wheels. I could not understand how the engine moved. So with my arms in motion like a steam engine's driving rods going back and forth I asked my Mother how was that kind of engine able to move? I do not remember if my Mother was able to explain it to me.

As I became older, I made friends with Tommy Birdsall who lived just past the station's Route 94 hill, and Glen Macnary who lived nearby on Mount Airy Road. For many years we often played in, on, and under the overpass, the station and yard areas. I remember seeing the black smoke stains on the underside of the bridge. The Route 94 overpass has been gone a few years and the station was torn down in the early fall of 1949.

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In 1954 we moved to Firthcliffe. This time the O&W station was almost a stone's throw from my house. I have the understanding that Harry Quick had been the station agent there from 1943 to the early 1950s. His daughter, Phyllis Quick Merrill, was appointed station agent before the time we moved to Firthcliffe. Phyllis lived in the station with her husband Walter and their children, Walter Jr., Karen, Linda, and Richard. During the time the Merrill family lived in the Firthcliffe station my sister Carol would occasionally baby-sit for them.

The O&W Railway delivered a piece of furniture to our Firthcliffe home in the spring of 1955. The furniture came out of North Carolina and somehow wound up in the O&W's Weehawken yards. The Ontario & Western brought it up the West Shore to the mainline at Cornwall and then to the Firthcliffe station. The Firthcliffe station had 2 sets of large double doors for the waiting room. Did these doors have the large brass O&W logo door knobs? I do not remember what was on them. One set of the large double doors opened to the mainline track, the other set of double doors opened out to a small side yard and roadway. This side yard and roadway at one time had a single-track siding that went past the double doors a few yards. The Firthcliffe yard had a coal siding for the Firth Carpet Company mill and a siding used for delivering lumber for Ushmans Hardware store. There were many summer nights when I lay in bed that I could hear the O&W crews switching freight cars in the yard. The empty coal cars were taken out and the loaded cars were spotted on the Firth Carpet Company's coal bin siding, along with boxcars of lumber for Ushmans being spotted by the station sidetrack.

I played in and out of the waiting room and in the rail yards for many years. I remember bench seats along the walls and several framed pictures of O&W steam engines on the walls. On the yard side of the station near the double doors was a single style door for the entrance and exit of the upper level living area. The stairs were narrow and had a sharp left turn about 3/4 of the way up. I knew this about the stairway because when my sister was baby sitting I would sometimes go up to see her.

When we played in the rail yard sometimes the train crew would be there. By talking to one of the trainmen, James Russo, I found out that everything that the O&W was responsible for maintaining had to have a sign with numbers on it. Once we asked the track gang to give us a ride on their little yellow track car, and they said they couldn't do it.

In the early autumn of 1956 with the fall foliage at its peak, some of my friends and I went down to the yard to play on the lumber. We discovered that the coal cars in the siding not only had coal, but also had a foot of snow on top! So we climbed up the sides of the cars and on to the snow, and of course had a snowball fight! One of my friends with me that day was Paul Redfern. His older and bigger brother Ken along with his buddies just happened to be nearby walking the tracks. So we turned our attention along with our aim at them. This was a big mistake! We all had to leap off the cars and run up the tracks, around the turn, out of sight. If they had caught us I am sure our faces would have been washed in the snow.

In the winter of 1957, some of my friends and I went sleigh riding down Mill Street. This street went past the roadway to the O&W station. The mainline tracks and roadway to the station were parallel to each other at this point. When sleigh riding down that street you had to turn in the station's roadway, or you would end up crashing into the Mill Street S-turn tunnel wall that went under the mainline tracks. I was first to go down the hill and turn into the station's road. The snow was deep enough to sleigh right over the ties next to the outside rails. As I was doing this I noticed a bright headlight coming at me very slow, so slow, I let my sled continue to travel over the ties toward the engine. I knew the engineer had to have seen me, but he never blew the horn. The other guys did not follow my sled's path and they stayed on the road to the station.

Phyllis and Walt Merrill moved out of the station in the early 1960s, before it burned down in September of 1963. The station had been set on fire. By the time it was noticed and called in there was more fire than

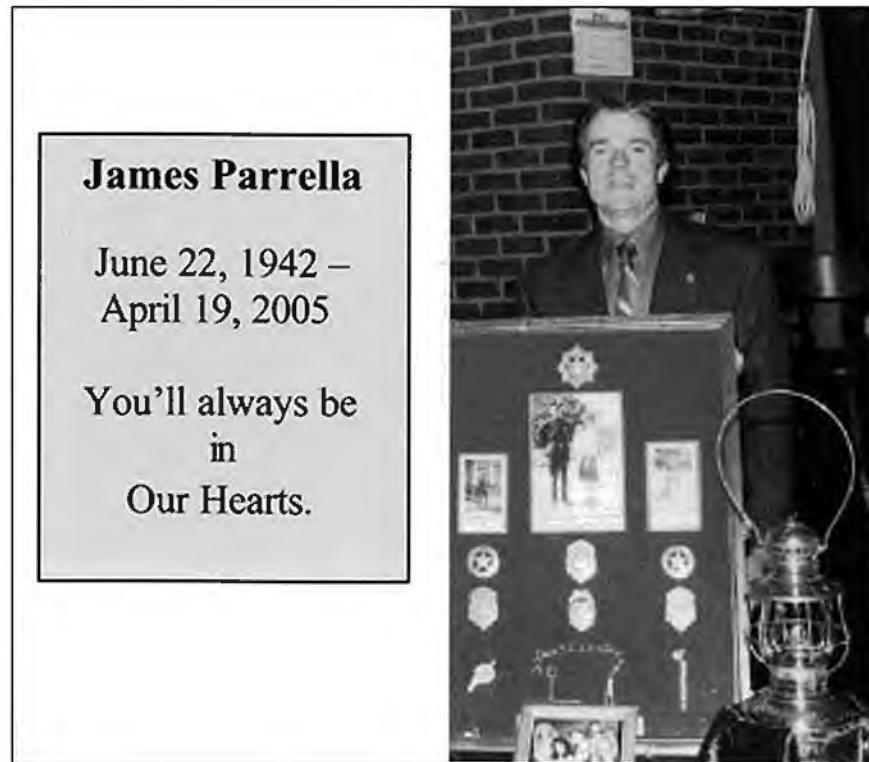
building showing. I watched the firemen spray water on the letters that spelled the name Montana. This name was carved in large letters near the top west-end side of the station. The firemen saved it, but the backside of that piece of wood was burnt so bad it made it very brittle. Some of the station's foundation, the weathervane, station sign, a piece of wood with the name Montana on it, some photographs and my personal memories are all that remain of the station today. Phyllis and Walter Merrill told me later that there were steamer trunks they left in the attic that they had intentions of going back for. The trunks were filled with O&W steam engine and station pictures. Her father, agent Harry H. Quick, using his camera, took most of them in his early years of employment on the O&W. Many years latter, I was told that the trunks with all their contents were removed by an out of state station scavenger before the station burned.



One summer day in 1956 I rode my bicycle northwest across the O&W Orr's Mills trestle. During the time when I rode my bike or walked across the trestle, the O&W trains were still in service. The many times that I did cross the trestle I fortunately never met up with a train. I went up the tracks to where the New York State Thruway (1-87) was under construction in order to watch how the road was being built. The O&W supplied cement cars in that area to the Cooney Brothers concrete mixing plant for the road construction. A short distance past the track siding for Cooney Brothers, I came to a place where the mainline track was crossed by the roadway under construction. I noticed the flagman there was one of the track crew that I knew. It was James Russo of the Village of Cornwall. Unfortunately, there wasn't any train activity when I was there.

Right at the northwest end of the Orr's Mills Trestle, there was a track siding to supply coal to a large coal storage building on the hillside. A friend of mine, Ron Paloschi's, house was nearby. One day we decided to explore the coal storage building. Once inside we had to climb up the wall mounted ladders to get from one room to the other. The building had a couple of levels and about 4 rooms. There was different size coal in each room. As we walked across the top of the coal we would start to slide down it and hit the wall on the other side of the room. This was a lot of fun for two 13 year old boys.

At the southeast end of the Orr's Mills trestle, Mill Street crossed over the mainline tracks. There were crossing signals there that had red flashing lights only. Up under one of the red signal light hoods was a bee's nest. The lens looked very thick to us, so we threw stones at the nest to knock it down. The lens broke, we ran. A few days later the O&W Railway Police were in the Firthcliffe neighborhood looking for the person responsible. I just might have in my O&W memorabilia collection the badge and photograph of the police officer who was looking for us!



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