

The Midland & Beyond
The New York, Ontario & Western Railway
Contributed By Richard Palmer

(This paper was written in 1967 by Frederick G. Griesmyer of 79 Lake St., Cleveland, N.Y. He died January 6, 1969 at the age of 79. He was Oswego County Historian and took a great interest in local history. Prior to retirement he was a supervisor for American Telephone and Telegraph Company).



Many paragraphs could be written about the old "Midland" sometimes called, "Old and Weary" which would take one back to the early days and its construction. There were no steam shovels, graders, trench diggers, steam hoists, etc. In 1866, however, through manual labor, pick and shovel, the road between Oswego and Jersey City, a distance of 325 miles, was built and in operation in six years, 1866-72. In the building of the main line there were 27 iron bridges, 80 wooden bridges and 117 wooden trestles constructed. The townships along the line issued \$3,000,000 in bonds in the aid of construction of the road. The Town of Constantia created an indebtedness of \$87,500. All of these bonds were redeemable January 1, 1868.

Lumber was so plentiful that the cross ties, averaging 3,000 per mile, were nearly all chestnut, white oak and cedar. Bridges like the one constructed at Fish Creek, two span 147-feet long, constructed and erected by the Passaic Rolling Mill Company for \$6,027; two piers and two abutments of first class masonry, approach trestle work, and built of Georgia pine, with a total cost for all at \$10,000. One half of this expense was borne by the Canastota and Camden Railroad, which Company was given the right to use the bridge jointly with the O. & W. for a period of five years. They started opening up the new line on February 8, 1887 when the first train left Canastota, carrying fifty carloads of coal for the glass factory in Cleveland, the coal being shipped from Pennsylvania over the Elmira, Cortland and Northern Railroad to Canastota. The New York and Oswego Midland was officially opened for passenger and freight service in 1872; it had two trains, east and west.

The name of the New York and Oswego Midland R.R. was officially changed in 1880 to New York, Ontario and Western Rwy. Branches to the road continued to be built to Port Jervis, Monticello, Kingston, Delhi,

Utica and Rome, and the coal line to Pennsylvania in 1887. It was the only line east running reclining chair cars and in December, 1888, steam heating of the coaches together with combination mail and smoking cars were added features. All passenger coaches are made of steel today, but when railroads first built passenger coaches, they were made mostly of wood. To build a car of the best kind required 2,400 feet of poplar, 3,400 feet of ash, 1,000 feet of white pine, 2,300 feet of yellow pine, 600 feet of oak, 400 feet of the strongest hickory, 400 feet cherry, 400 feet maple veneer, 2,000 pounds iron, 700 lbs. castings, 300 lbs. galvanized iron, 250 sheets tin, 70 panes glass, 200 yards plush, 100 yards sheeting, 300 lbs. hair, and various other fixtures. The total cost for material and labor was approximately \$5,200. The cost today, all steel, about \$40,000.

On January 2, 1892, increase in trade forced the O.&W. to lease 326 new box cars from the Chicago and Alton railroad to be delivered by April 1, 1893 as they had completed arrangements for through lines of steamers to run between Oswego and Duluth bringing grain east and returning with coal for the west. At the same time the O. & W. were having 500 new freight cars under construction at Middletown N.Y. for use in grain trade, each car having a capacity of 1,000 bushels with trap doors in the floor of the cars so as to unload the grain and save elevation.

The Ontario & Western Railway stock was a good investment during their prosperous years. They had over 700,000 shares of preferred stock, and \$50,000,000 of common outstanding. In 1892, the common stock sold for \$23.00 per share on the New York Stock Exchange. Dividends were paid each quarter on both the Preferred and Common.

Another large industry which the O.&W. made ready for, was the shipping of milk and other perishable goods. They built several milk stations along their line in 1892, also of that same year in March they added six more. Two milk trains were operated daily carrying 41,000 cans of milk to New York City. Ice houses were also built to supply ice for their refrigerator cars, and during the ice harvesting season, 8,000 tons of ice was shipped from several places along Oneida Lake to these O. & W. ice houses. One thousand men were employed in cutting, storing and shipping. A large number of additional refrigerator cars were purchased to carry on this business.

The enormous shipments of all kinds of berries and perishable fruit from Oswego County to New York and other cities caused the O. & W. to supply extra trains during these seasons. Records show, for strawberries alone, in one instance for the month of June 1888, one special train of 19 refrigerator cars, 200 crates to the car; and in another instance, one train loaded with 10,000 crates containing 360,000 quarts passed through Cleveland.

Another interesting source of revenue for the O. & W. came from the lumber industry of the Town of Constantia. At Cleveland, during the winter months, pulp-wood stove wood, tan bark, and logs were shipped to various places; thirty-five teams of horses were kept busy drawing this wood to a siding at the Cleveland station.

It was several years after the opening of the New York, Ontario and Western Railway in 1872, the permanent railroad stations were constructed. Sylvan Beach with its long platform and depot was not completed until May, 1892. Several others were completed the same year, including the \$50,000 station at Middletown, New York.

Caretakers were employed in the beginning of the road at all stations who were not familiar with rates, routes, etc., and during this early period a young man by the name of Mr. J. J. Hartigan was employed to ride local freight trains and waybill what freight was ready to move in the trains.

At the time the stations were equipped with telegraph service, the men were taught the art by qualified telegraphers who were sent along to instruct them and this was a slow process, as it required from six to eight months constant practice before a man became proficient enough to copy a train order. A Mr. Wilson, the agent at North Bay, N.Y., who was an operator, was sent to Bernhard's Bay, N.Y., to instruct the agent there; Mrs. Wilson was also operator.

Telegraph schools, in different localities of the State, were teaching men and women the art. There was one at Oswego which was in operation since 1867, a Mr. C. P. Meads was the principal. Later years the operators and agents were selected from students at the different stations taken in by the agents to assist in doing the station work.

The following personnel were among the first agents and operators employed by the N.Y.O.& W. Railway:

Oswego, E. S. Cullinan, freight agent; J. J. Hartigan, ticket agent. It was here at Oswego where the first dispatcher's office was set up. Movements of all trains were handled from this point. Later on this office was moved to Norwich. Mr. Reuben Sheldon, day operator and Mr. L. T. Dibble, as night operator were assigned at Oswego to handle all telegraph business.

Seneca Hill (known as Minetto) Fred J. Beale; Fulton, George C. Webb, Mr. Webb, later on was connected with Armstrong Cork Co., Broadway, Fulton; Fred Sutherland, Pennellville; Eugene M. Kimball, Caughdenoy; Gurney Hallock, later on George Bennett, Central Square; Edward W. Sprague, Gurney Hallock, for a time, then J. Jesse Woodward, formerly of Sylvan Beach. Hallock resigned to open a bakery at Bernhard's Bay. Charles Shaw, West Monroe; D. Sweet, Constantia. Later on H. H. Talcott, of Bernhard's Bay was made agent and operator. Mr. Nickerson, father of the late Isaac Nickerson was made agent and operator in place of Talcott.

Then came a Mr. Groves, and J. J. Dickie, filled in as agent. He later became agent at Oneida Community (Kerwood) then about 1884 were Charles Schuler, Mr. Kinchey, H. H. Talcott, Emmet Tooke, C. F. Ingersoll from 1893 to 1903; Allen B. Ferris, Henry D. Morse, Arthur F. Getman, Jesse R. Hadley, P. F. Loftus and Glenn Curtis.

Mr. Albert C. Whitney was the first agent and telegraph operator at Cleveland. He was born in Mexico, Oswego county on June 22, 1849. At the age of 21 he entered the employ of the Midland Railroad Company (O&W) working first in the Dispatcher's Office at Oswego where he remained for one year. For a short time he was employed at Rome, N.Y., and in November 1871, took charge of the station at Cleveland, continuing in service there until July, 1906 when he resigned because of ill health. In November, 1906, he and his family moved to Mexico where he died March 1, 1910. Mr. Clarence D. Soule, a native of Smyrna, N.Y., and then agent and operator at North Bay, succeeded Mr. Whitney, remaining until 1929 when he resigned to become Assistant County Treasurer of Oswego County.

The student operators under Mr. Whitney were as follows: Christy Halligan, who later became an official on the old West Shore R.R.; Charles W. Potter, Eugene H. Doody, Clarence H. Drumm and Roy O. Whitney.

Beginning August 8th 1889, Cleveland station was put on a 24 hour schedule, and George A. Kent, a native of Vienna, N. Y., was the first night operator. In 1895, a change was made, and Mary E. Scullin, of North Bay, was appointed the night operator. She held this position for nine years, at which time she was stricken with a brief illness and died January 5, 1904. She was succeeded by another native of North Bay, Mr. Daniel Dixon. Mr. C. H. Bonneau, the former agent and operator at Central Square, N.Y., who had been in the employ of the O. & W. for over forty years at various places, began his student training under the supervision of Mr. Dixon.

Continuing our O. & W. story, we will attempt to include at this time, the names of the first Agents and Operators southward beyond Oneida. Railroad companies, like other large concerns are constantly making changes in the personnel requirements and the O. & W. had many manpower problems. The early difficulties at the start, as already mentioned, continued for many years. The majority of the personnel were happy and their morale high when they were following expert professionals - events themselves moved rapidly as the railroad continued upon an expanding scale. Workers were "frozen" at essential jobs in critical areas, and among their arduous duties was to teach the fascinating art of railroading to the many students which the railroad officials considered one of their most important assets.

As the students developed into professional railroaders they were transferred to the various localities as Agent and Operator or an Assistant. The same applied to work involved for Conductors, Engineers, etc. Many of these Students worked their way up to the top and became governing heads of the railroad.

The O. & W. continued to draw business from all parts of the State and their incomes increased each month. However, after the first World War, automotive trucks started making inroads into the railroad business until the railroads were forced to seek other revenue outside their general freight business. Automobiles were becoming a real means of transportation and this all forced the railroads to discontinue some of their passenger trains as well as a general layoff of personnel.

Again in the fall of 1916, Mr. Bonneau was chosen as the relay telegraph operator in the Dispatcher's office at Norwich. He remained there until March 20, 1920, when he was assigned as agent and operator at Norwich. He remained there for several years when until he was assigned as agent and operator at Constantia, N.Y. On September 1, 1931, Constantia station was closed due to the lack of business. Mr. Bonneau shifted again, and this time he went to Fulton as second tour operator for three months, when Fulton was closed. From there he was assigned as agent and operator at Sylvan Beach, remaining there until late fall of 1935; transferred to Sidney for one year as station agent, then bid in the Clinton job as operator and clerk remaining there until 1940.

At this time between Oneida and Oswego only two stations remained open - they were Cleveland and Central Square; Oswego only having a freight office. Bernhard's Bay was closed January 5, 1939 and Ernest Baker, the agent and operator, was transferred to Cleveland, remaining there until February 7, 1945 when Cleveland station also gave up the ghost.

In the prosperous days there were 90 telegraph positions between Sidney and Oswego, and in July of 1941, there were 2,100 employees. The O.& W. did not make enough money to pay their taxes even though a readjustment of the tax program was made.

Train No. 9, which was a combination milk and passenger, made its last run to Oswego the evening of Saturday, March 29, 1957. As Mr. Bonneau relates, he was the agent at Sylvan Beach loop station, and as the train departed the train crew waved their hands, and the Engineer blew the farewell whistle several times. It was rather a sad sight for the old timers as the train disappeared from sight, knowing that it was the last run of that train for all time.

The O. & W. Railroad was a great industry and meant so much to the thousands of its employees. The operating heads sensed the inroads which the trucks, inland waterways, pipe lines and airlines were making into their business and the only fair solution for the officials was to establish a labor priority system. This system was to help and protect the older employees. It was, of course, not a very likable means of a livelihood and many employees began to shifting other industries. The old and well-established group of men remained with the railroad. I believe one of the oldest active employees of the O. & W. who was

transferred from one station to another during this turnover, and former Cleveland, was Mr. Charles H. Bonneau, now of Central Square, N.Y.

Mr. Bonneau had filled nearly every position on the road. His career with the O.& W. had been one of many exacting duties and varied responsibilities; and as we mentioned, Mr. Bonneau started his student training at Cleveland.

He was acting as a helper at Munnsville, N.Y., in 1905, and in 1906 he was transferred to Cleveland, acting as a helper to C. D. Soule, practicing the art of telegraphy under the tutorship of Daniel Dixon. He served as helper to Mr. Soule until 1907 and then was transferred to the night tour as an operator. Mr. Dixon, being transferred to the new Fish Creek tower which opened for service in connection with construction work on the Barge Canal that opened in 1918, Mr. Bonneau became the first tour operator at Cleveland. He was transferred to Sylvan Beach for the summer season of 1910, returning to Cleveland in the fall. He was transferred to Oneida in 1911 as 2nd tour operator; Jesse Hadley was the ticket agent.

