Interurban Lines in North Central West Virginia

By Logan McDonald

Interurbans were shortline electric trolley railways that provided cheap and convenient public transportation to rural, small town, and suburban areas. It was at a time when roads were poor, automobiles were rare, and heavier railroads too expensive or distant. The Monongahela West Penn Public Service Company (Mon West Penn) was the primary operator of these lines in West Virginia.

The West Penn system began as a loose collection of independent electric interurban trolley lines that sprang up across the northern end of West Virginia around the turn of the twentieth century. They were then merged together into Mon West Penn in 1923, as part of the larger interurban railway system that also served southwestern Pennsylvania. In WV, their service areas consisted of three disconnected lines. One followed the West Fork and Monongahela rivers from north of Fairmont and south through Clarksburg to Weston. The other lines extended from Parkersburg to Marietta, Ohio and from Moundsville along the Ohio River through Wheeling to Rochester, Pennsylvania. At one time, they also ran intercity streetcar systems for Clarksburg, Fairmont, Wheeling, Parkersburg, and Morgantown.

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Museum News

As the West Virginia Railroad Museum begins to wind down its yearly exhibit, we reflect on how well we’ve succeeded in our mission in bringing our state’s railroad heritage to the forefront. The B&O Railroad theme, which opened in late April of this year, was one of our most well attended exhibits with well over 1,400 visitors as of this writing.

Our new AmeriCorps member, Cicely Schuring of Lititz, PA will have formally begun her tenure at the museum on September 6th, and is looking forward to getting started. Like her predecessors, she will be taking the lead on performing research, writing, layout design and gathering materials for our next annual railroad theme. The 2019 exhibit will feature the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia. Please join us in welcoming Cicely to the team. -ed.

Lil’ Leroi, An Engine That Could

The trilogy of the Lil’Leroi Switchback Stories winds its tale in the completed rail journey from Durbin, West Virginia down the Greenbrier River to Cass and ends with a ride on Shay engine #5 to Whittaker Station. Stories are about trains, talking animals, and challenging adventures.

Author Julia Elbon's inspiration for the series of three books for children is based on a little yellow gasoline powered locomotive that actually serves on the “Durbin Rocket” excursion train. The fictional Lil’Leroi had the blues because he felt less popular than his more robust steam powered cousin number 3, and was in need of some respect and recognition in his life. This is the story of how he and his friends work to achieve it.

The stories and illustrations by artist Heather Johnson are designed to stimulate children’s imaginations, creativity, and to enable them to write on their own. Some notable developmental aspects include learning to like oneself and to appreciate the value of friends. Locomotives, who conquer the challenging mountain grades of Cheat Mountain on a daily basis provide a powerful metaphor about overcoming life’s obstacles. -ed.

For more information and to order go to lilleroi.com (and be sure to look for the “surprise”), or shop amazon.com, (ISBN#9780870128684)
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Mon West Penn’s equipment featured all manner of Brill and Cincinnati Car Company trolleys. One of the most common later types of cars seen on the system were West Penn’s distinctive ‘Center Door’ cars. These cars made it easier for passengers to get on and off without steps or a platform outside of the car and increased their on-time record from 96 to 99%.

Another common class were the Cincinnati Car Company’s curved side cars. First built in 1922, this car design featured metal exterior walls that bowed outward, which gave them remarkable strength for their light weight. The cars delivered to West Penn and its affiliates from 1929 through 1931 were the last cars of this type produced.

Both the curved side, center door and traditional body styles served until the end of West Penn operations. In addition to transporting passengers, they also offered express freight service using specially built ‘box motor’ cars built on trolley chassis.

Since all interurban lines needed electricity to run, the company built power generating plants to support their operations. These power plants produced more electricity than the railway needed, so they began selling it to residential customers in the towns they serviced.

By the 1940s, their power generation business became larger than their interurban business and eventually became the “Mon Power” electric utility that exists today. West Penn then spun off their Interurban division into a separate company and named it “City Lines of West Virginia”.

By 1947, competition from automobiles and other factors made running the interurban lines financially untenable, leading to their gradual closure. All of the lines of the former West Penn system in WV were abandoned by the early 1950s, bringing to a close a brief but important era of public transportation history in West Virginia.
The Life and Times of a Little Red Caboose

By Jim Schoonover and Bill Van der Meer

Sometimes good fortune and a simple twist of fate is all it takes to turn a life around. If B&O caboose number C2504 could talk, she would have had an interesting tale to tell. Such a rhyme might have all of the makings of a sad demise and an ending with a triumphant return to glory. In reality C2504 and her sisters began their service lives as Class I-5 wooden cabooses at the B&O Washington, Indiana shops between 1924 and 1929. The original I-5s were built with steel ends, sides and underbody frames.

They were clad with wooden sides, interiors and floor coverings. It also sported the traditional cupola. C2504 and five of her sisters were converted in 1939 by having their original structures removed down to the floor system. They were then outfitted with very strong sectional steel exteriors. Gone was the cupola and replaced with integrated side bay windows and port holes on the ends. These rebuilt cars were then reclassified as I-5ba.

The I-5ba was unique to the B&O Railroad. Bearing a striking resemblance to the covered wagons of the old west, they were quickly identified by the workforce as “Wagon Tops”. With their robust all steel construction they were very tough little cars and survived some 45 years of being pulled or pushed upgrade at the end of trains by “Big Six” 2-10-2 steam powered helper locomotives and the later diesels.

The last of these 6 cabooses were retired by the Chessie System in 1984. Shortly after its retirement C2504 was donated to Davis & Elkins College for display. However, construction of a field house at her once cozy on-campus location nearly proved to be her undoing.

She appeared destined for the scrapper’s torch when Jim Schoonover stepped in from “stage right” to save her. Davis & Elkins College gave C2504 to Mr. Schoonover in the year 2000 with the provision that she could not be sold.

He then proceeded to restore her on his property near Montrose, WV. Major repairs and painting were finished by the early fall of 2001. For several years C2504 served as the site for Wednesday night “low-stakes” poker games. Sunshine and foul weather soon gave the car a distinctive pink patina, which required the car to be repainted about every three to four years.

Faced with yet another much needed paint job, Jim decided to give C2504 to a fellow Rotarian, Sidney Gillispie, along with Joyce Allen and J.F. Allen Company. After a face lift conducted at JF Allen’s facility she was returned to the campus of Davis and Elkins College where she now serves as the “Caboose Café”.

Prior to restoration, C2504’s yellow livery reveals her Chessie System heritage. Photo by Jim Schoonover
No longer functioning as that familiar pink landmark guiding visitors to Jim’s house, she still retains her original number and bright red paint. Number C2504 is now adorned with the D&E College logo and an attached deck with generous seating and plenty of green space for standing room only. Faculty and students will likely marvel at her clean lines and good looks, where an old railroader might reminisce about her years on the rails. He or she will know that underneath that beautiful facade lies a lot of history. - Photo by Bill Van der Meer
Cass Shops Steam Update

Three years after the Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad assumed management of the formerly state-run Cass Scenic Railroad, three out-of-service locomotives have been brought back to life at Cass WV. D&GVR President and CEO, John Smith, reports five geared Shay steam locomotives in service on Cheat Mountain plus one Heisler working out of Durbin WV. As a result, the railroad may now lay claim to having one of the largest stables of working steam locomotives in the world.

Waiting in the wings or in process are a respectable number of additional steam locomotives undergoing inspections and/or overhauls. For starters the Buffalo Creek and Gauley #4 Consolidation is currently undergoing major repairs. Climax #9 (formerly Middle Fork RR #6) is being reassembled and is scheduled to return to service early next year.

Mr. Smith states that in addition to routine running repairs, “Locomotive boiler inspections, commonly referred to as Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Form IV Inspections, must be performed every 1,472 service days or every 15 years, whichever arrives first. Added to this are the required annual boiler inspections.”

I asked John about the status of Climax logger number 3, which had been pulled from service on the Durbin Rocket, to which he replied: “He is simply biding his time while we catch up from performing five FRA Form IV inspections requiring major overhauls in our first three years.” Number 3 and several others are awaiting their turns, as well as the proposed restorations of WV Northern steam locomotives 8 and 9.

All of this concurrent activity underscores the fact that maintaining steam engines is a continuous and very labor intensive undertaking, requiring considerable infrastructure and a highly skilled workforce. The D&GVR is fortunate to have inherited a cavernous and fully equipped main shop building blessed with 25,000 square feet of floor space. Adjacent buildings include separate wood, paint, maintenance of way, and restoration facilities.

Cass appears to be a very diverse operation. Targeted cross training enables employees to acquire a variety of skill sets and “wear different hats”. This will depend on the season or as the workload between train operations and shop needs dictate.

There are approximately 12 regular shop employees. Although there is no formal apprenticeship program, shop employees gain experience by working up through the ranks. During the winter months train operations staff may become part of the shop forces, whereas a segment of the
shop force may assist in train operations during the summer tourist season. The shop foreman may even serve as a locomotive engineer at times.

Thanks to WVRM board member, Jack Sanford, who provided initial information and to John Smith for his assistance. - ed.

Shay locomotives all steamed up at Cass Shops
Photo by Bill Van der Meer

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