

Last Day of the O&W by Doug Ellison

March 29, 1957 is for many O&W fans a definitive day and perhaps the definitive day of the railroad. It is widely known as the day the O&W died, and widely quoted, mentioned and remarked on in many books, publications and memoirs. Indeed, it has always been a date that has fascinated me and my interest in the railroad and how the world seemed to have changed forever after. Part of that is because of my family association with the railroad and part of it is that I grew up along its remains post March 29, 1957. Indeed it can be a demarcation or end of the classic railroad era begun in 1865 at the ending of the Civil War or the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. Going forward from that date the world changed; Sputnik was launched in October and the Race for Space began, "The Torch was Passed to a New Generation" upon the Kennedy inauguration in 1961 and soon began a new age of assassinations, violence, cultural change, Vietnam, Watergate, jet plane travel, campus unrest and riots, and memories of old worn out railroads were forgotten as weeds grew over the scarred right of way and the echoes of the horns disappeared far over the distant hills into the past. Not only did the lives of O&W employees and their families change that day but so too did local businesses, cities, towns, municipalities and US as a collective culture. No one who was involved with the railroad would ever be the same again.

As part of the mystery surrounding that date I thought it would be interesting and meaningful to look behind the curtains of time and get an understanding of how the O&W died that day. A key to this quest was the O&WHS archives that just happens to have a copy of the last RTM (Record of Train Movements) or dispatcher sheet for March 29, 1957. Delving into that and decoding it, matching it with newspaper clippings from that time, along with photos and reminisces, we can get a very good idea, almost a minute by minute blow of what was happening out on the railroad. What we can't understand from the data are the feelings and emotions that were involved that ran very strong and deep. We also can only know what was actually recorded. As any railroader knows, there are several maxims in rail operations; What really happened, what the crew said happened, what the operators "made" happen, what the dispatcher knew or was told and what the dispatcher ultimately recorded. We basically only have what the dispatcher recorded.

Still with all this information the "Old Woman" has still managed to confound, contradict and confuse, withholding secrets that have gone with her to her grave and that perhaps as the layers of time and years keeps piling up may never be answered. However, this little exercise has generated a few surprises, busted a few myths and created a few more questions within this fascinating subject. The original intent was to write a brief narrative from the vantage point of the dispatcher's office covering from 12:01AM on 3-29-57 to the arrival of the last train into Middletown. The data was assembled in spreadsheet form and it became enormous! A short narrative could not do it justice so you are left now with this brief introduction and the spreadsheet layout of much data to ponder and digest. Perhaps at some time an article or substantial chapter can be written about this day and what it meant using the data here as a baseline and coupled to all the many photographs taken that day to further bring it back to life. That unfortunately is beyond the scope of this little exercise at this time as we go into the 55th Anniversary.

Here are some comments from the data within the spreadsheets to ponder and reflect on

Looks like the only substantial train was X803 into Mayfield with 80 cars

The only reason for NO-1 to go all the way to Oswego was to make the turn south to pick up the Fulton equipment and cars which goes to show how different things were then, as they used a road train to haul down the equipment as opposed to it running down on its own. Job assignments and union agreements were in effect until the very end. There are sources and news clippings that state that X801 was the last train south out of Oswego on March 28th. In reality that is a true statement in that the last Oswego cars left as revenue run that day. However, on the 29th the crew only went to Oswego as a convenience to turn the engines, coming and going as a caboose hop.

All cars off the Monticello & Port Jervis lines went to the Erie at PJ and crew ran caboose hop PJ back to Middletown.

The only reason for 116 to run Norwich to Oneida appears to have been to deliver an empty back to the NYC, one perhaps either missed or not released early enough for NO-1 to have handled.

There were no train movements Dickson to Scranton, over the Eaton line or between Clinton Jct. and Utica. There was also nothing into or out of Maybrook. It could not be determined when the last movement was made into Scranton, so that is still a mystery. We do know from various sources that the last train between Clinton Jct. and Utica ran on the 28th of March with Engine 115 out of Norwich. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the last SU-1 ran into Norwich on the 28th and hence Utica was one of the first victims of train offs and shut down. With no SU-1 on the night of the 28th out of Mayfield there was no need for a Utica run the 29th. The last run to Eaton may have been made as early as Sunday the 24th as Eaton was primarily served by an Oneida turn on Sundays. This is subject to speculation and still a mystery. No trains ran into or out of Maybrook on the 29th, and it might be that X803 was the last train to depart there headed to Coxtown as the crew was on duty at 7:30pm the 28th.

There were no train meets on March 29th.

Hank Kortwright really scorched the ballast with NW-10 averaging over 42 mph between Sidney and Walton.

Overall, all trains really got over the railroad and there apparently were very few slow orders, it may have been old, rusty and weedy but it was fast.

X118 the Delhi local – again a difference of culture, time and better highways as they ran the extra train miles rather than taxi / automobile as 118 ran Walton to Cadosia, and so did X801 later to pick this consist up at Cadosia.

It took a few minutes to reorient and remember that in looking at loads and empties one of those empties would always be the caboose or in some instances this day more than one caboose !

There was actually a train start on Saturday March 30th. We all look at the O&W dying as the last train order was written and made complete at 8:24pm on the 29th, but there was still a lot of activity to

complete and another train start when the crew changed at Cadosia. After the order was written Dispatcher Baxter was still on duty, and then was relieved by Dispatcher Cartman at 11:59PM. Cartman was on duty until after the arrival of Extra 805 into Middletown and the crew reported off at 0400 hours on March 30th. The funeral was held the evening of the 29th and everyone went home after the train left Norwich but the Old Woman was still out there alone in the night running off miles, with headlight illuminating the path in front of the 805. Even after the funeral services it wasn't over yet and there were a few people still to sign on duty.

It was odd to see the time of X805 recorded through Northfield at 10:54PM as not only was Northfield not an open order station at that date but there was no reason for anyone to be there at that hour. This mystery was finally solved by Jeff Otto and O&W dispatcher Gail Allen. There was a system of Train Announcers that the dispatcher could plug into and listen on an open phone line to tell when they passed and record the OS time. Some guys referred to these as "growlers" as the open circuit line with a train going by emitted a growling like sound. One mystery solved as to how this train was OS'ed at Northfield.

Another mystery was the last train order itself. This had struck me as odd in that wasn't the O&W south of Cadosia CTC ? So why was a train order written to convey operating authority superseding the CTC? I had never heard this questioned but it didn't make sense. Well, the O&W didn't exactly have CTC in the true sense. Surprise ! The system was actually a "Remote Control Manual Block" system. Thanks again to Jeff Otto for tracking this down and it is worth an independent article in itself explaining what the O&W bought and how it was used and nomenclatures associated with it including the "Middletown machine". Hence we have a legitimate train order authorizing a movement between Norwich and Middletown.

As with many research projects, there are more and more questions that crop up that seem to have no answers. Here are a few that are still open items that further time and research may or may not shed additional light on.

1. Where did X803 go on duty prior to going Mayfield to Coxtown and return and where did the 45 mty's disappear to that were not in the train at CX ? Would they have been dropped at Cayuga for DL&W or ???. Best guess is that the DL&W got them at Cayuga.
2. Did WN-9 go on duty 28 Mar at Middletown ?
3. What / when were the last trains to Scranton and Eaton?
4. Who was the fireman on the Rome Local? O&W fan Bill Wilcox mentioned the fact this gentleman did not want his picture taken as he was too upset about it being the last day. Contemporary newspaper articles shed no light on this and Bill has passed on.
5. Who was Tremper who got authority between Summitville and Highview behind X114? It is presumed he was a track car operator perhaps patrolling behind trains and maybe checking Highview Tunnel.
6. Note the **dispatcher error** as he marked Eng 127 FX to FN while the OS was for Engine 117. Was Engine 127 the other NW-2 up there and if so did they also have a caboose. Evidence from Jeff Otto is that Fulton had three jobs, but I imagine not three trainsets.
7. Any official references regarding FN and FX ? (up Fulton way)
8. Last day photos show crew of X116 at Oneida. Engineer is identified as Frank Sherman – is it ? I never heard that questioned BUT the dispatcher has J.L. Fritz marked as the engineer and Sherman is marked later in the day for X805 out of Norwich to Cadosia. Frank Eldred was also

quite emphatic upon being questioned years later that Frank Sherman was NOT the engineer on his train out that night (X805 NH-HD). So who was really at the throttle of 805 between Norwich and Cadosia ? Again, there is what really happened and what the dispatcher wrote down.

9. The Middletown paper mentions "less than half a dozen cars" left in Sullivan County that were not yet mty. X805 did not make any stops nor pick up any tonnage enroute. Did these cars exist? If so when and who picked them up?
10. X805 South, the last train was cleared at Northfield and Mountaindale. How did this happen? As we have noted Northfield's OS was by the train announcer system. Mountaindale was probably taken off the "Middletown machine" as who would have been at Mountaindale to have given the OS at 2:36am on Saturday morning March 30th?
11. The Chenango County Museum at one time had the consist of X805 South out of Norwich, does anybody have that info?
12. What time did Dispatcher Cartman sign off at Middletown on Saturday March 30th and lock the door? That we don't know other than he was still on duty at 0400 to record the crew off, apparently he didn't see the need to mark himself off.
13. Other than the engineer and conductor who made up the rest of the crew out of Cadosia shortly after midnight. It would appear that the operator was already off duty. Who worked that last Cadosia shift and did he or anyone else stay around to watch the markers of Caboose 8345 disappear to the south? It's too bad we don't have some sort of a visual of that last crew change in the very new hours of Saturday March 30, 1957.