



The Ithaca Branch of the D.L. & W.

By Richard F. Palmer

Much has been written about the early history of the Ithaca Branch of the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western. However, very little has been said about its later years. Until the Syracuse, Binghamton and New York (Syracuse Division) was completed in 1854, most of the northbound anthracite coal traffic from Pennsylvania funneled through the Ithaca Branch (then the Cayuga and Susquehanna) via the Erie from Great Bend, Pa.

From Ithaca, the coal was shipped by canal boats to its destinations, some of which went to Canada via Oswego.

Thereafter, the Ithaca branch was relegated to agricultural products and other conventional commodities. A milk train originated in Ithaca.

In a general way, the Ithaca branch is fondly remembered for its student specials during holiday seasons, as Cornell University and Ithaca College passed from one semester to another.

What follows is a history of a very typical upstate New York branchline that was an adjunct to one of the greatest anthracite carriers of them all, the DL&W.

Through the 1920s and into the 1930s such communities as Candor and Catatonk were still very much dependent on the railroad. Trains carried the mail, traveling salesmen, feed, grain, milk, coal, and other commodities in the days of less-than-carload (lcl) freight. The cattle dealer also used the railroad. Children rode the

The local freight makes its way north to Ithaca in 1949. Here, it passes some gardens in Catatonk at milepost 213. The five car local is comprised of two milk cars and two hoppers of coal sandwiching a box car of feed.

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passenger train to school. The local grocer and druggist also were dependent on shipments by rail. If one wanted to send a telegram, he or she would go to the railroad station to do it. Such messages were sent over the Western Union Wire.

One insurance man, it is said, loaded his bicycle on the morning train from Owego, got off at Candor, rode his bike to visit his customers, and then pedaled back to Owego late in the afternoon. In the fall, local farmers around Catatonk shipped their potatoes and baled hay by rail to Owego and from there to many different cities and towns where it was sold. In Candor there were cattle pens just above the depot. Martin Barnes of Owego recalled driving cattle by foot through the village to the depot and pens. In those days they did not truck animals.

Another large and important service provided by the railroad was the shipment of milk and milk products. During the '20s and '30s carloads of milk cans were loaded aboard trains and shipped to the great consumer market in New York City. Creameries in Candor, Willseyville, Catatonk, and other towns along the route provided revenues and commerce in the valley. Not only was most freight shipped by train but also many passengers were carried.

A timetable dated April 28, 1929 shows three daily passenger trains in each direction. Train No. 958, carrying Pullmans, usually two coaches, a smoker, baggage and express cars, left Ithaca at

10:05 P.M. connecting at Owego with the "Lackawanna Special" in Owego at 11:15 P.M. and arriving in Hoboken at 6:30 A.M. the following morning. Likewise, passengers bound for points on the Ithaca branch would board the "Whitelight Limited" at Hoboken at 8:55 P.M. and arrive in Owego at 5:34 A.M. or in Ithaca at 6:55 A.M. the next morning. Eastbound, the Pullmans went to Binghamton in most cases, where they were separated and put onto appropriate trains.

In addition to the scheduled passenger trains, student specials, often consisting of five or six coaches, were operated Christmas and Easter and as required. The Ithaca agent did a big business in students' trunks at the beginning and end of the college semesters. Express service continued until passenger service ended. In addition, the DL&W maintained a city ticket office in Ithaca until the night trains were taken off with the change of timetables on September 24, 1933. When trains were heavy, a pusher was often required on the switchbacks. Barnes recalls the student specials in particular ran 60 to 65 miles per hour, "and it was quite a sight to watch them."

Although the switchbacks were somewhat of a disadvantage, the normal connection with the "Lackawanna Limited" at Owego made it over the line in an hour. A study of timetables shows that the "Lackawanna Limited" and its Ithaca connection was faster than the competitive Lehigh Valley out of Ithaca. In later years, however, the DL&W allowed the service to deteriorate and the day train and the open-vestibule coach were rarely cleaned.

By the late 1940s, the DL&W Ithaca branch was becoming weed-grown. The line remained in operation to Ithaca until December, 1956, and to Candor until May, 1957.



Ithaca Branch of the DL&W was connected with the mainline in Owego by a 1,000-foot, eight-span bridge over the Susquehanna River. Bridge was demolished in 1959 after DL&W mainline between Vestal and Corning was abandoned.

The Ithaca branch had a short-line, personal air about it and never really became impersonal as did its parent main line. Due to weight restrictions, the smaller classes of locomotives were used, such as the 500 class 2-6-0's, a few 900 class 4-4-0's, (primarily Mother Hubbards) and 300 and 700 class 2-8-0's out of Binghamton. A 2-6-0 was assigned as the Ithaca switcher.

The bulk of the branch's business was in Ithaca before it faded away, including numerous feed mills, milk plants and lumber yards. Coal was an important commodity until the 1940s when the switch was made to oil. Among the firms serviced by the DL&W were Dairymen's League, Morris Chain Co. and Borden's.

Another peculiarity of the Ithaca branch was the 1,080-foot curved bridge over the Susquehanna River originally constructed when the main line was extended west in 1882. It was a single-tracked affair and, when completed, terminated the Lackawanna's involvement in running trains from Binghamton over the Erie mainline. A turntable, hand-operated, was built near the new DL&W station on the south side of the river. The bridge was rebuilt in 1926 to allow the use of heavier locomotives.

On the Ithaca end there was a three-stall enginehouse, a turntable and a water plug. The original passenger station, a long rambling wooden building, was replaced in 1926 by an attractive brick structure that stands to this day and is used as a bus terminal.

People living and working along the Ithaca branch became familiar with the trains and their crews. Some of the old frustrations reminiscent of the days when "Old Puff" chugged along the route were carried on into more modern times. One day in the 30s, the 4 P.M. passenger train became snowbound at Herrick's (present site of the Candor-Catatonk golf course). The Herrick family served coffee to the waiting passengers while the snow plow cleared the tracks.

Another incident involved a man in Candor who know the Bible backwards and forwards, as they say, and was thought by some to be "a little touched in the head." One day the steam locomotive and train stopped at the depot in Candor and this gentlemen decid-





The city of Ithaca lies in a geologic depression carved out by glaciers from the Ice ages. This fact forced all railroads to employ relatively steep gradients or use switchbacks to reach the city. The Lackawanna's line employed a double switchback to surmount the hills to the southwest of Ithaca. A short eastbound (south direction) passenger train has reached the first switchback in early 1939. The 4-4-0 will pull forward a short distance further then back up the track in the foreground to reach the second switchback.

Lackawanna Railroad

Making like much larger locomotive, 2-6-0 #908 is switching the Morse Chain Works on this cold late winter day in early 1939. Morse Chain was a long time major customer of the Lackawanna and the I&O branch remained in place between here and downtown Ithaca after abandonment of the rest of the branch. The Lehigh Valley continued to serve Morse Chain for many years after the DL&W's abandonment. To the left is the switchback track.



ed to block the tracks. When the train started, he would not leave, and yelled to the engineer:

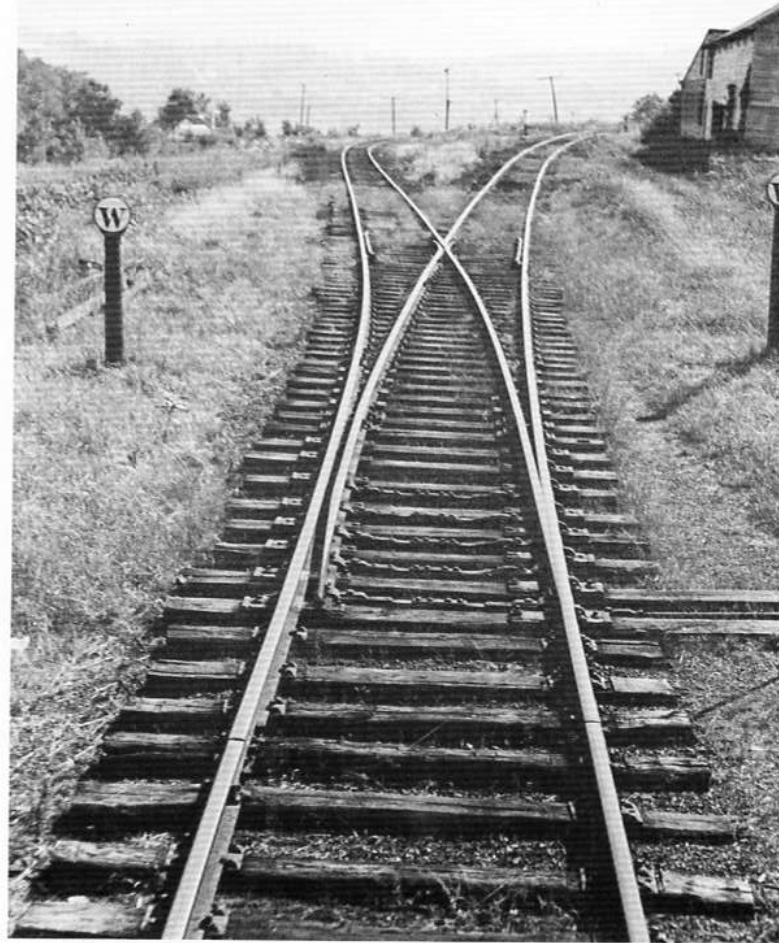
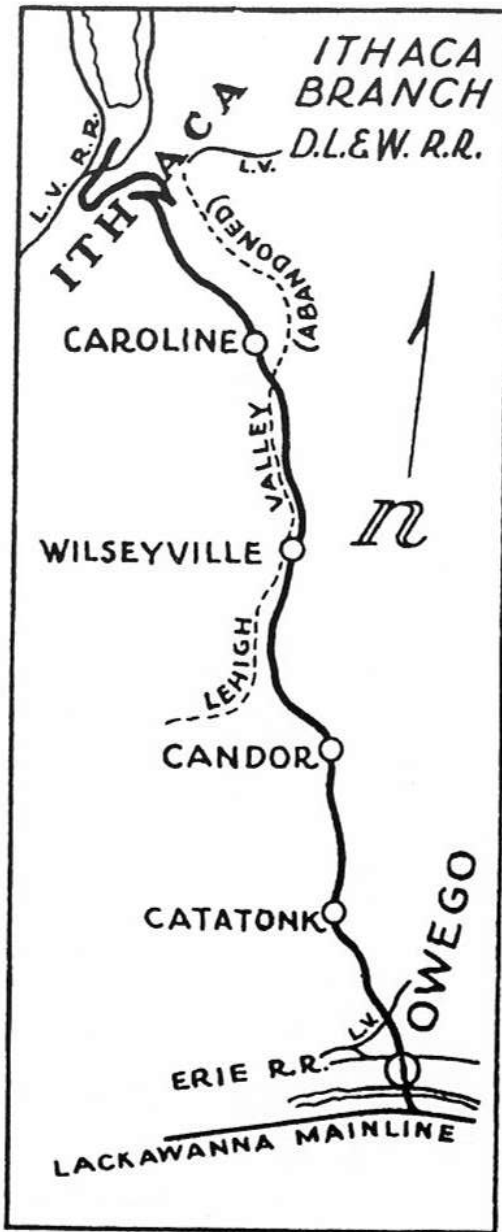
"I am familiar with the Bulls of Bashan and

I'm not afraid of your cook pot on a stove!"

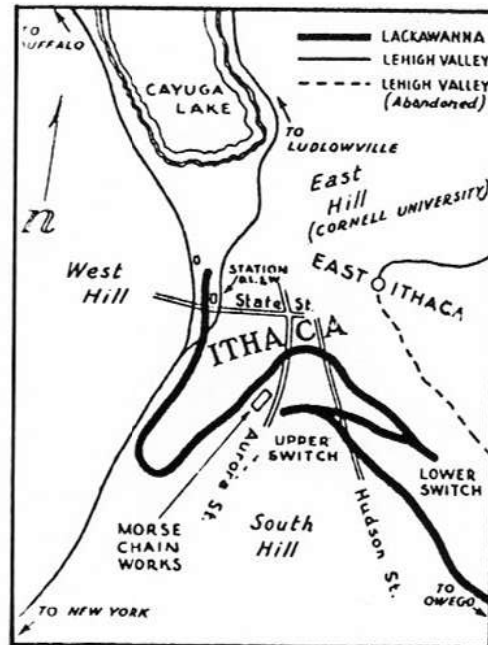
Occasionally when there was no milk to be loaded on the train, the workmen would signal the engineer to pull out. One day, during a stop at Catatonk, the fireman got off the engine and headed for the bushes to relieve himself. When the engineer was signaled there was no milk that day, he pulled out. He had no way of knowing that the fireman was gone because the engine was a Mother Hubbard and the two were separated. It was not until the next station and the steam was running down that the engineer realized there was no fireman. So the engineer had to back up several miles to pick up the fireman.

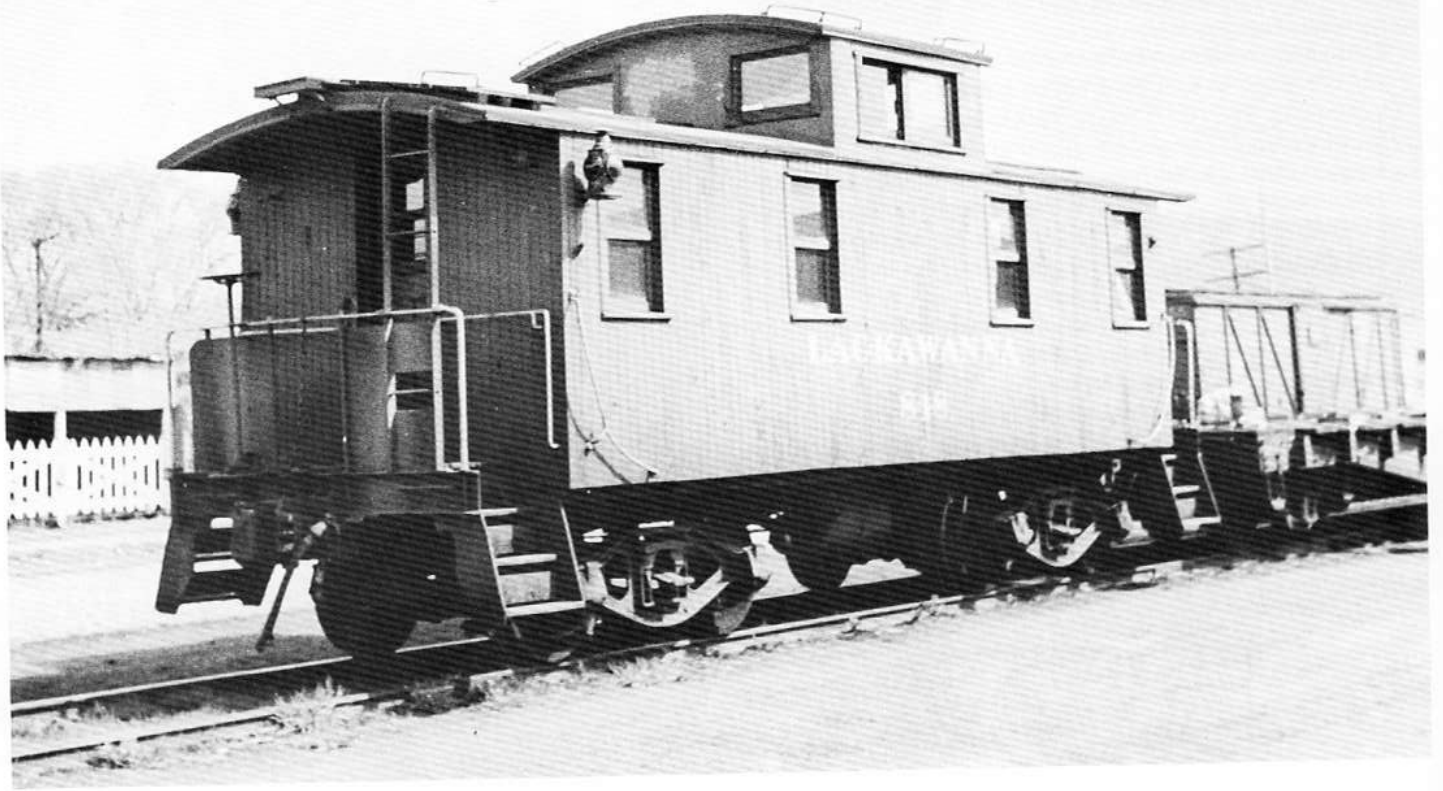
Another time the conductor, left in Candor by an engineer too quick on the throttle, had to catch the next train to Owego. Often during holidays, the entire crew, with the exception of the engineer, became drunk from celebrating a bit too much.

Barnes also recalled that the 10 A.M. train from Owego regularly unloaded freshly-baked bread at Catatonk, made at Nye's Bakery in Owego and still warm when taken off!



Trains entered Ithaca by negotiating a switchback, which had been in use since the 1850s. The switchback replaced inclined planes. For years, it was one of the wonders of picturesque Ithaca. Maps courtesy National Railway Historical Society, Bulletin.





(Above) Standard wood Lackawanna tuscan red caboose. #848 was assigned to the Ithaca job. May 21, 1955.

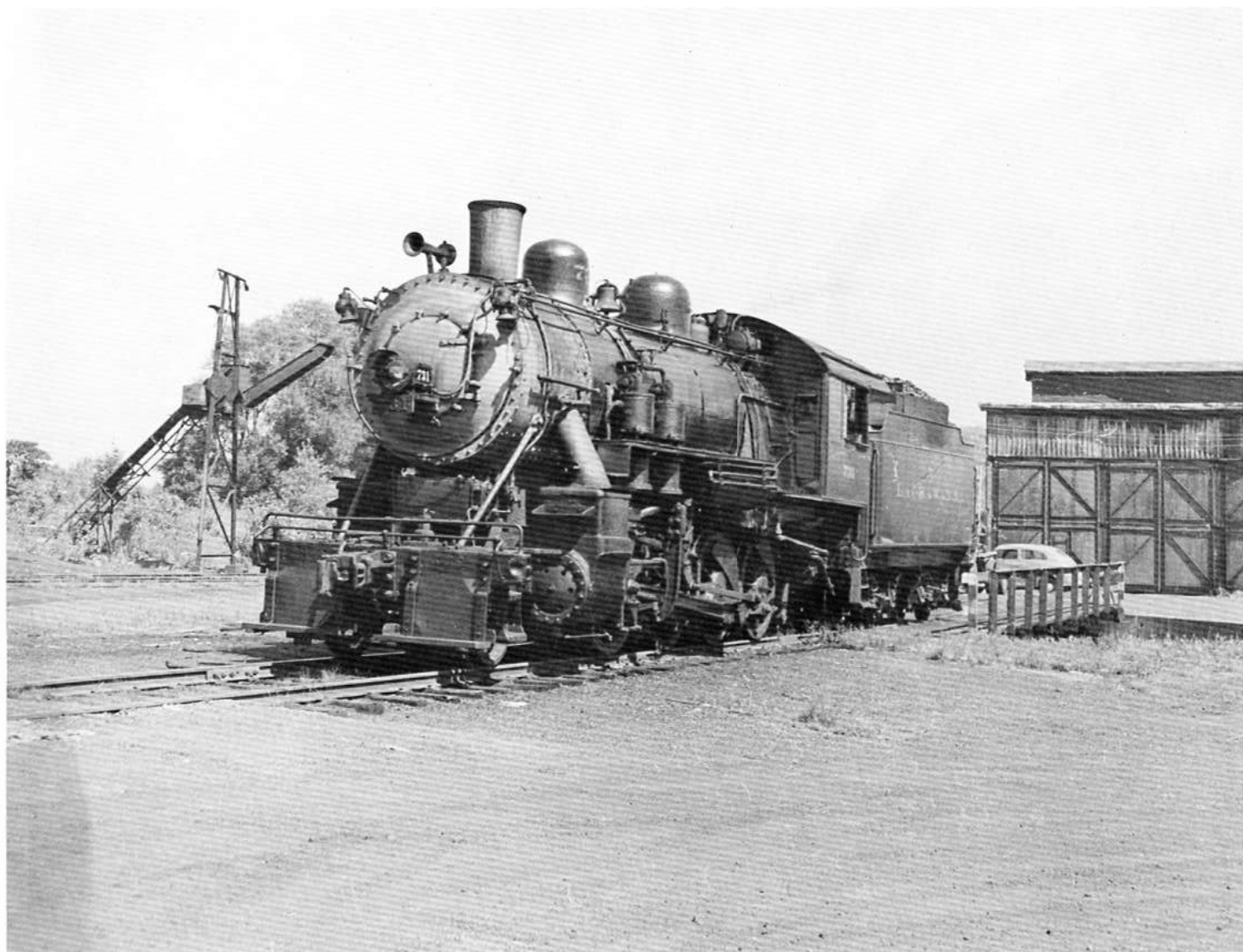
(Below) Brakeman and conductor of the Ithaca freight enjoy a cup of coffee in the caboose in 1949.



DL&W #731 at the water plug in Ithaca, 1949.



(Below) Consolidation #731 complete with an air horn in addition to the steam whistle simmers at the Ithaca engine facility in 1949. Ithaca featured a three-stall enginehouse and an interesting small coal loading facility seen to the left of the locomotive.





(Left) HH600 #410 is substituting for the regular locomotive switching in Ithaca in the Spring of 1954.

Tony Perles

(Below) Switching by the passenger station in Ithaca on a late summer day in 1955.

Tony Perles





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A 1955 view of the Ithaca passenger station with a typical DL&W terra-cotta roof. A pair of boxcars are spotted at the frame freight station in the background.

On another occasion, the section crew on a speeder (motorized handcar) stopped on a siding in Candor to wait for the train to go by from Ithaca. The crew, assuming this was the regular train, resumed their trip to Ithaca on the gasoline "putt-putt." A few miles up the line they were astonished to see a southbound passenger train coming toward them at speed. The earlier train, as it turned out, had been a student special. The crew jumped off but the speeder was reduced to so much scrap when the locomotive struck it.

Others weren't so lucky. One day in the 30s, Mrs. Lena Hollenbeck turned her automobile directly onto the crossing in the path of an oncoming train and was killed. Another man from Hubbardtown (just north of Catatonk) ran on foot and jumped in front of a train to commit suicide. More fortunate was Melvin Whitmarsh who was heading to Candor to visit relatives. He went across the tracks in his Model T at the same time the 1 P.M. train from Ithaca was coming. The train struck the front of his car, spinning it around and throwing him through the air and away from the train. The car was demolished but Mr. Whitmarsh escaped without a scratch.

In the 20s and 30s the roadbed, although ballasted only with cinders, was well maintained by section gangs. Each gang had a seven-mile section. A signal maintainer went over the line regularly on his velocipede, carrying his lamp oil and tools with him. Station agents on the line in 1935 were P. J. Killea in Owego, A. B.

Jackson in Candor, C. L. Gridley in Willseyville and S.M. Normile in Ithaca. The DL&W and Lehigh Valley shared facilities at Willseyville, where there was a "union station".

The Lehigh Valley's Elmira and Cortland branch paralleled the Ithaca branch for several miles, crossing it at grade on an eight-degree angle at Caroline Junction. All Lehigh Valley trains were required to stop not less than 200 feet or more than 800 feet from the cross-over, and could not proceed until the red signal was displayed. The normal position of the signal was "Proceed" for DL&W trains. It appears that this arrangement had existed since the Lehigh Valley branch had been constructed. A similar arrangement existed in Owego, where the Lehigh Valley's Auburn branch crossed the Ithaca branch.* The Elmira and Cortland branch was abandoned between Spencer and East Ithaca on June 30, 1935, and the signal was then dismantled.

Another user of the Ithaca branch was Standard Oil Co. at Catatonk which received coal to operate its pipeline pumping station. This was the first major oil pipeline in the U.S. The station had 18 boilers and used large quantities of pea- and buckwheat-sized coal daily. It operated into the early 30s. One of the engineers was Hiram O'Dell, a large man with bushy whiskers. As a young

*Lehigh Valley Employees' Timetable #1, April 24, 1932, and earlier timetables in possession of Herbert Trice, Auburn, N.Y.



The ever-present HH#409 ready to depart Ithaca with another short local in 1955. The locals were short but always seemed to have quite a diversity of freight cars.
Tony Perles

man, he was a teacher. Among his pupils was John D. Rockefeller, who was born on a farm north of Owego.

Mr. Rockefeller would go out of his way to visit his old school teacher on his annual pilgrimage to his birthplace. Mr. O'Dell, the first employee of the pipeline to be granted a pension, spent his remaining years near Owego. While he was employed at the pumping station he would commute three miles between his home and work on a velocipede, finding it easier than walking. One day, Mr. O'Dell was told to keep off the railroad tracks. Mr. Rockefeller was informed of the situation and tactfully mentioned the situation to the attorney for the railroad. He said: "It occurred to me that possibly sometime when you see Mr. Sloan (president of the DL&W at the time) and he was in good humor, it might do to mention the man's name. I should esteem it a favor if he would permit him to ride the tricycle. It will be a cup of cold water which I am sure will be much appreciated." This was in 1885, and there is no mention of what the outcome was.

With the improvement of highways and more automobiles, the Ithaca Branch gradually began to fall on hard times. More and more the shippers deserted the railroad in favor of trucks. The number of passengers dwindled. Finally, passenger service was discontinued on Sunday, March 29, 1942.

Some 50 "mourners" left for Owego at 12:30 P.M. aboard Train #956, returning at 5:10 P.M. on Train #953. Also annulled were Train #952, leaving Ithaca at 8:05 A.M. and Train #971, return-

ing to Ithaca at 11:20 A.M. The last train was under the charge of Conductor John E. Vandermark, Engineer Burt Wilcox of Elmira and Fireman Ed Doyle, also of Elmira. Nick Rich was Trainman. The following Monday, bus service was substituted. This was operated by L.T. Dickinson Company.

After passenger service was discontinued, automatic block (semaphore) signals were removed. A few special passenger trains were operated into Ithaca during World War II for the military, as well as during peak holiday travel times. The Lehigh Valley was grateful since it was swamped with traffic, particularly out of Sampson Naval Base.

It is said that circus trains continued to come into Ithaca over the DL&W, at least into the 1930s, and had to be split into four sections to get them down over the switchbacks. The usual route was from Binghamton to Owego and Ithaca, and then over the Lehigh Valley into Elmira, over the old Elmira and Cortland branch.

As time passed, the switch engine was removed from Ithaca and by the end of 1953 only Candor and Ithaca still handled less-than-carload freight. The branch was dieselized in 1951 or 1952, as that was the time when the DL&W was being rapidly converted from steam to diesel. For years, an ALCO 600-horsepower switcher, #409 (ALCO #69257 HH660 1940, Weight: 197,500 lbs to EL #324) was assigned to the branch. The agents in the remaining stations at Candor and Catatunk stayed on until October, 1950. As far as is known, no railfan specials were ever operated over

the line.

Ultimately, more and more of the freight business went to trucks and the Ithaca branch became a neglected weed-choked branch line with deferred maintenance being the order of the day. By the mid 1950s, most of the Ithaca business had faded away and the only major users were at Candor and Catatunk. These firms, primarily feed mills, farm supplies and cattle business, were Arthur Hollenbeck & Son and Ward & Van Scoy.

After hearings, abandonment was authorized by the Interstate Commerce Commission (I.C.C. Finance Docket 19118) on October 25, 1956. The last train, consisting of Locomotive #409 pulling three gondola cars of scrap, three box cars and a caboose, pulled out of Ithaca for the last time at 4:20 P.M., December 4, 1956.

A cold, raw wind swept through the open doors of the freight house, chilling a little group of nostalgic witnesses. Desolate yards, a long-unused passenger station and a freight house, constructed of heavy wooden timbers attesting to its age, were left behind by the shabby little freight train.

On hand were Frank Connors, Ithaca freight agent since 1941; Edward Troupe of Scranton, clerk; W. B. Osmun, chief clerk and cashier for 18 years; Paul J. Ludgate, freight houseman; Louis Stevens, retired baggageman; and Lawrence H. Scott, freight handler.

During the ensuing months, unprecedented requests were made to the government by municipalities and businesses along the line in Tioga County to rescue the railroad between Owego and Candor from oblivion. Tax bills would be drastically reduced as an incentive to the DL&W to keep the line intact.

As a result of these efforts, the ICC ordered the railroad to continue service to Candor until further notice. Attorneys for the shippers requested the abandonment proceeding be re-opened. The Federal District Court held a hearing to consider the businessmen's request in April, 1957. While the testimony was being studied the railroad was requested to continue service, which it did on three-day-a-week schedule.

Meanwhile, C. Paul Ward, of Ward & Van Scoy, did some investigating on his own and concluded that the losses charged against the branch line by the railroad were unsubstantiated by facts. To the old defense that the shippers could as easily be served by trucks, Ward said that it would involve a minimum extra cost of \$3 to \$4 a ton.

"It is misleading to say that cost could be passed on to consumers. Consumers just won't pay that additional cost. Competition won't support it and it would mean that we would just lose that business." He said he and Hollenbeck would have lost at least \$11,000 for the first three months of 1957 if the branch had been abandoned.

Between January and May, 1957, Mr. Ward said, there were 127 carloads handled at Owego, Catatunk and Candor, with the railroad charges coming to \$17,891.01. The railroad offered no defense as to what expenses could be charged against this gross revenue.

Mr. Ward said, in answer to the fact that there were at least six motor common carriers of freight, that they were light truckers not capable of carrying bulk commodities. "Grain generally runs 30 to 40 tons to a freight car and the most that these truckers would

Picking up the empty flat from the team track in Ithaca. With both an overhead crane and drive-on ramp there must have been a lot of machinery delivered by rail to Ithaca at one time. Not much business remains by this May 1955 date.

Tony Perles





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409 was the assigned Ithaca locomotive from the time steam was retired until abandonment of the branch. Other ALCO HH600 switchers would substitute for #409 when it was in the shop. On this May 21, 1955 date the black ALCO has its short train together and ready for the run up the hill to the Morse Chain works.

carry would be about five tons at the maximum to a truck.”

Judge Stephen W. Brennan concluded, however, that continued operation to Candor “would involve expenses out of all proportion to the revenues received by the applicant or the benefits realized therefrom by the public.” The action was then dismissed by the court.

Service was discontinued on May 25, 1957 and two days later the last car was removed from the branch. Rails were removed in October, although the bridge over the Susquehanna River remained in place until 1959 when the DL&W main line was removed between Vestal and Corning. There was some thought of building shops on the bridge as a novelty, but this was never carried out. It is said the bridge could have been purchased for \$25,000.

Eventually, the Lehigh Valley purchased the 1.5 mile line between Ithaca yards and Morse Chain, primarily to haul out scrap. The branch was inherited by Conrail and was used for coal storage until a serious derailment. This last remnant was officially abandoned in 1982.

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