Connecting Cairo to the Catskill Mountain Railroad Line

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from the personal collection of Sylvia Hasenkopf

Originally published in Daily Mail July 29, 2003

When America's post-Civil War railroad expansion finally forged into the rural Catskills from the banks of the Hudson, one would think such technology was coming here for the first time.

But echoes of clanging steel and chugging smoke were conjured up in the minds of many local old timers when the Catskill Mountain Railroad built its branch line to Cairo in 1885. Four decades earlier, stretches of now refurbished railroad bed had been the route of an ambitious pioneer railroad called the Canajoharie & Catskill. A proposed 74 mile route was to stretch from the canal lock at Canajoharie in Montgomery County to Catskill Landing in Greene County. It would provide a more efficient link between the fertile Schoharie Valley and the Hudson River and hence the New York City market.

While the reliable Erie Canal lock system, completed in 1825, had improved the state's transportation corridors, there were limitations. Certain areas remained frozen over for periods in early Spring. The railroad would provide a more direct route and an extended operating season. By late 1830 a Topographical survey had been completed through the efforts of Lieutenant John Pickell and the Army's 4th Artillery Regiment. The total projected cost was $700,000. Shares of stock in the Railroad would be sold at a par value of $50. After a second survey was completed and confidence of investors bolstered by a favorable review, the village of Catskill was the scene of an animated ground breaking on October 27,1831. Thomas B. Cooke, the President of the proposed railway and Orrin Day, President of the Tanners Bank led a procession which included a thirteen gun salute at sunrise and numerous speeches.

The celebration would be a bit premature, however, as four years slipped by before any track was actually laid.

Land was being snatched up all along the route and fears of real estate price gouging had even reached the governor's office. A stern warning against such actions was issued. Finally some movement was seen upon the election of new directors and the retention of Ephraim Beach as engineer of the project. He had been assistant engineer on the Erie Canal and was involved with notable railroad projects in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He even carried an honorable military background, having served as a Captain in the War of 1812.

Also central to the future success of the project was Beach's decision to bring on George Cook as one of his assistant engineers. While only 20 years of age, Cook had ably assisted Beach in New Jersey on the Morris & Essex line and shown great expertise.

These men gave careful attention to the route itself and removed several steep inclines by studying parallel routes not before deemed feasible. Generally the run was along low-lying fertile farmland, but there were many stream crossings, requiring rock blasting and skilled masonry work. (Several of these beautifully arched bridges remain intact today.)

Financially, the project was straining and efforts were made to appropriate funds from the state. Although turned down for direct funding, the state did allow the railroad to sell $400,000 more in stock. By 1837 panic was starting to set in amongst local residents but Mr. Beach and his assistants persevered and the work continued.

Finally, after many setbacks, due to flooding, the final grading was completed. Cross ties and timbers were laid and the strap iron rails from England were attached. Being a narrow gauge railroad, the width was set at four feet, eight and a half inches.

The engine, was manufactured by H.R. Dunham of New York City and called appropriately, the Mountaineer.

Its cost was $6,300 and weighed nine and a half tons, which is light by railroad standards. Its power was fairly limited and appeared crude having only received a patent a year earlier. Its smoke stack was odd looking. The cars it pulled were not much more than carts on four wheels. It arrived locally in late 1839 and by Spring of the following year commenced operation. The pioneer venture was finally a reality.

Within the township of Cairo the railroad would have two or three stops, as evidenced by an early toll rate sheet. These would include from East to West, possibly a spot opposite Elisha Blackmar's hotel in South Cairo along the Susquehanna Turnpike, a spot near the present day intersection of State Route 23 and 32, and Woodstock along the Catskill Creek.

While information on the early days of this railroad are scant, we can learn much from some of the documents that have survived. A rate sheet donated years ago to the Durham Center Museum makes mention of many items transported by the railroad. Items such as candles by the box, grain, barley, lead bars, smoking pipes, snuff, tin, wool, leather hides, grindstones, barrels and building lath. They speak of a difficult existence but simple lifestyle.

It was a life of hard work, but great faith and reward.

While specific information on the people who worked the railroad is limited, we know from an early receipt book that James Ekler ran the engine, William Weed was a fireman (loaded the firebox), Augustus Hamlin, John Cornwall, John Goetschius and Richard Elmendorf all worked on the tracks.

Perhaps the best description of this strange yet exciting new form of transportation is found through the eyes of a young boy, many years later:

"When I was a little shaver of about 11 years, my father took me with him one day down below South Cairo on business. It was rather late in the fall and we drove down near a large mill that stood on the Catskill Creek about three miles west of Leeds. We came to a place where there was a queer looking machine with what appeared to me a frightful looking chimney and a big stove on wheels, which stood directly across the highway. My father said: "Johnny: that is the new railroad and that is the Indian," as I understood him, but of course, he must have said "engine."

I was rather skittish yet curious, and our steady old horse was more so than I was, and began to rear so that father had to get out and hold him by the head. Then I had a tall, rather tapering smoke stack about seven feet high, There was no cab, I remember, for later on when cabs were adopted, I noticed the difference. There was a tender next to the engine, a short four wheeled affair. There was a single pair of drivers about three feet in diameter, and while the affair would look very small and insignificant today, it seemed to me then, as big as a barn would now. The engine and the tender were not more than twelve feet in length, but the brass bell that was on the engine, that they kept ringing, took my eye, and I thought it sounded very pretty. There were three short four-wheeled freight cars that resembled the ore and coal cars of the present day (1897), and in the rear of these were two passenger cars that were simply four-wheeled platform cars with old stagecoach bodies thereon and fastened with bolts. In each of the cars were perhaps a half dozen passengers, and I, boylike, wondered how they dared to risk their lives in that way. By and by, after the track, which was composed of bar iron about two inches across and half and inch (thick) bolted on string pieces, was repaired, which occupied a few minutes, the bell rang and the engine, slowly at first and then with increasing speed, moved off up the road."

After almost two solid months of steady operation, the little railroad suffered its first setback. It was on a cool day in May, when the train crossed the second of three lattice bridges, at High Rock in Oak Hill. There had been heavy rains that season, which weakened the center pier. Just as the train was passing over, the bridge buckled and collapsed, sending three freight cars and two passenger cars plunging into the creek below. Jehiel Tyler, a Durham native, was killed. Another man suffered broken legs and several others received only slight injuries. The engine had safely reached the far side on firm ground and the crew was unhurt but they had witnessed a horrible scene.

It was imperative for the railroad, however, to get back in business as soon as possible. The area of Oak Hill had developed as a major freight supplier by virtue of its successful malleable iron works and other mills. Work commenced on repairing the bridge and it was ready by June. Regular runs continued but outside forces were working to squash the pioneer line, as it represented competition to powerful interests in Albany both financial and political. The accident at High Rock acted as a catalyst for critics of the project and funding from the state dried up. Despite plans to extend the run to the rich farmland of the Schoharie Valley, investor confidence was waning and the end appeared near. On May 20, 1842 the railroad was sold by the State of New York to Amos Cornwall and others for $11,600., a fraction of its original value. After one last ditch effort to save it, the rails were finally ripped up. Some sections were sold to local farmers for wheel banding. (A section survives in the Durham Center Museum.) The engine was supposedly sold to the Catskill Point Ice House, to be used as a stationary hoisting apparatus.

Although it never fully extended to the Erie Canal, as planned, the little pioneer railroad did make an important contribution to the future safety of railroads. A method for spilling sand onto the track ahead of the engine to prevent slipping on grades was developed by Catskill Foundryman, Benjamin Wiltse.

Also, for those of us who live along the route, the story of the “C&C” has been a source of fascination for years. Many have learned bits and pieces of history about this early venture and pondered what might have been.

The railroad bed itself has provided both the youthful and the young at heart with memorable hikes. The exciting discovery of a superbly engineered stone arched bridge, provided a lasting testimonial to the ingenuity and skill of its makers. One can still make the journey today and picture that bulky little

engine belching smoke, thundering down the track. The conductor tips his hat and hollers a greeting, which is muted by the deafening noise, on his way to the next stop.

(I graciously thank those who have gathered information on this topic before me, namely Vernon Haskins and Dr. William Helmer and Dale Flansburg, whose efforts enable me to retell this great story of a pioneer railroad here in the Catskills)

Home Table of Contents Greene County Overview Home Page