

## **REGINALD BARNEY'S TALK ABOUT TRAINS IN CANAAN**

**(ORIGINALLY TOLD TO CARDIGAN MOUNTAIN SCHOOL CLASS)**

**AND TAPE-RECORDED WITH ANN WADSWORTH, FEBRUARY 27, 2014**

“Are you at all familiar with the rails to trails path that runs through Canaan, Enfield and Lebanon to the North and Orange, Grafton, Danbury to the South?”

Back in the early 1840's, a company called the Northern Railway, a corporation formed by subscriptions and financed by them and they began construction of the first rail line ever to extend north of Concord, N.H. –The first stage of the construction went fairly smoothly, up to Franklin. After leaving Franklin, the terrain became more hostile. There were many sharp and lengthy grades, much cutting to do and filling to be done. The construction was done by Irish laborers, raw, hard working men from the old sort. No job was so difficult or dangerous as to phase these sons of toil. Their biggest hurdle was just 2 or three miles south-east of Canaan, at the Grafton-Orange town line, called “The Summit”. It was called the “summit” because it is the highest point on the line between Boston and the Connecticut River in White River Junction. All the streams and rivers on the southeast side of the summit ran into the Merrimack River. All the streams and rivers on the northwest side of the summit run into the Connecticut River. So what these Irishmen had to do at the summit was to make a deep cut thru the ledges. It took them 22 months of monotonous hand drilling and gun powder blasting to complete the job. After the summit, it was all downhill to the banks of the Connecticut River in West Lebanon.

And so, one November day in 1847 the first shrill screech of a locomotive whistle made beautiful music to the ears of a gathering of Canaanites who had assembled at the Depot to hail the arrival of train No. 1. Up to this point in time, the automobile had not been invented and the only means of transportation was by stagecoach, horseback, walking and canoe. So now townsfolk could travel not only to Concord but to Boston and back in a single day! Imagine the thrill at the prospect of joining hands with the outside world. It was truly an age of progress – a great time to be alive.

I was born in 1927, so the railroad thru Canaan had been in operation for 80 years. Vast improvements had been made by then, better track, faster speeds, new sidings and new signals and ownership of the line was now given over to the “The Boston & Maine”.

As a youngster I remember riding down to the Depot from our dairy farm with my father in an old farm truck – twice a month to pick up a load of grain which came in 100 pound sacks, for our dairy cows, our horses and chickens. There would be several other farmers lined up at the boxcar waiting their turn to load up, so I had time to explore the freight yard and take in the sights and sounds of train activity. I was intrigued by the huge steam engines and thrilled when the engineer would holler down their greeting to me. There would usually be some sort of train activity going on, an engine taking on water at the huge water tank, a pusher engine coming backwards from the summit and turning around on the Wye before returning to White River Junction, or it could be a way freight unloading supplies at the freight house or a passenger train stopping to take on or unload passengers, or an express passenger train roaring thru town without stopping.

During the 1940's and early 1950's, 12 Daily passenger trains including pullmans passed thru Canaan, 6 going South and 6 going North and a like number of freight trains.

A popular early morning train - nick-named "The Peanut" left Canaan heading South at 6:36 a.m. and reached Concord at 7:55 and Boston at 9:30. The Peanut returned, leaving Boston at 5:30 p.m. and arriving back in Canaan at 8:19 p.m. If you didn't want to spend the day in Boston you could take a 1:00 p.m. train out and arrive back in Canaan at 3:44 p.m. Trains back then were the lifeblood of the community ; they brought us mail which was sorted in special mail post office cars; likewise express packages, all kinds of freight was shipped in and out; farm machinery, milk, household goods, lumber, pulp wood, barrels of apples, cider, cordwood, mica, feldspar, coal.

Back in the very early days of steam, the steam engines were run by cordwood and that was a source of income for many local farmers and men who owned wood lots. On the down side, Canaan experienced several bad railroad accidents – the worst one happened on September 15, 1907. Freight train # 267 left Concord for White River Junction with a steam locomotive, a tender, and 27 boxcars - of which 21 were loaded, and the estimated weight of the train and load was 770 tons. On its way to White River, it was to meet a passenger train, #31 from Montreal and another passenger train , #30 from Quebec. When the freight got to Canaan, the crew found a red light which was notice for them to stop and wait for orders, so the Engineer and Conductor went into the Canaan telegraph office where they received from Mr. Greely, the Operator, a dispatch from the Dispatcher's office in Concord stating that passenger train # 30 would be running one hour and 10 minutes late, West Lebanon to East Andover, so the freight proceeded to West Canaan, a distance of 4 ½ miles to allow passenger train # 30 to pass there. Number 30 was the passenger train from Quebec , consisting of a locomotive, a baggage car, an ordinary coach, a smoker, and Pullman with 150 people on board. Many were returning from Cherbourg Fair in Cherbourg, Quebec. At White River Junction they received orders to run 40 minutes late to East Andover. On level track on the East end between Canaan to West Canaan, the two trains collided completely wrecking them driving the baggage car through the passenger coach killing 26 passengers and injuring 20 others. Both locomotives plunged down a low bank to the South. The momentum of the 26 heavy freight cars struck the passenger car edgewise above the flooring and cut its way through to the other end. The Smoking Car and Pullman had very little damage and the passengers in them escaped with very slight injuries. The morning was dark and dense fog had settled down on the Railroad bed. The freight was running about 25 miles per hour and the passenger about 30 miles per hour. Both engineers threw their brakes into Emergency and shut off the steam and they jumped into the darkness and miraculously escaped serious injury. Wrecking and Relief trains came from White River Junction and Concord with physicians and helpers and bodies were removed to hospitals in Hanover and Concord.

The last serious wreck occurred in Canaan, on August 19, 1949, injuring 44 persons when Northbound express passenger train bound to Montreal crashed head on into a siding where the Southbound passenger train headed for Boston was waiting. A crewmember of the Southbound train inadvertently threw a switch, which sent the Northbound Express over the siding on which the Boston had halted to permit the other to pass. A baggage car withstood the brunt of the shock on the Southbound and was reduced to a heap of shredded wood. On April 14, 1954, the last B & M steam engine left Westboro Station in Lebanon for Boston and possible dismantling. During the war years and shortly after,

Railroad stations all up and down the Maine line were crowded busy places with people coming and going all hours of the day and night. Railroads were the lifeblood of the community – the way to travel - everybody used them.

After the war, then came newer and more comfortable automobiles , interstate highways, large comfortable buses and of course, airplanes. They cut into the number of people using trains, and by

January 1965, a sign was posted at the Canaan Station and all other stations along the line stating the discontinuance of railroad services from the Upper Valley to Boston. It was truly a sad thing to read, because it told the end of an era.

Reggie continues:

"I have a few notes taken from Ned B. Smith's draft entitled, Flood, Frame, Quake, and Gale; he said, in addition to train wrecks, the train wreck tragedies struck the railroads by way of mother nature; blizzards and great floods; the Great Blizzard of March 1888 shut down the railroad for several weeks. The deep cut through the ledges of the Orange Summit were filled with drifted snow. The train's snowplows couldn't budge it; Chinese crews from Boston were sent up to shovel the snow out; it took weeks. Floods also wreaked havoc. The worst ones came in in 1895, March 1919, November 1927 and April 1934.

Bridges, roadbeds, and whole embankments fell victim to the rigid torrents, and damage to the Boston/Maine alone reached into the Millions. But the flood to end all floods in Canaan Village that is, hit us with the awful hurricane of September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1938. This time, the ancient grist mill was washed away and fell into the swirling waters with an terrible crash, and the railroad decided that it had lost its Canaan railroad yards enough times so it purchased the mill site and the dam that for so many years had acted as a destructive bottle neck and blasted the riverbed widely enough open so that no major flood damage has been experienced locally since.

"Ann Wadsworth": Ahhh, thank you! That was a very complete history of the railroad.

AW: You told a story, however, about going to Montreal with your school friends; do you remember that?

RB: yes, very vividly! [laughs] We were all excited, Class of 1944, Canaan High School, had planned a trip to go to Montreal, and of course, we were to go by train. And the train left Canaan at Midnight; we called it the "Midnight Express". Sometimes the train (it was not a scheduled stop) it would have to be flagged to be stopped, and so 6 of us in the graduating class and 2 chaperones /teachers went with us. We went to the Canaan Station just before midnight and told the Station Master that we were going to board to go to Montreal, so we got our tickets and went outside to wait.

Well, around the corner I can remember the corner coming around from Orange; we saw the headlights of this passenger train, and it was an express train and it was really speeding; and when he saw the signal, he put on his brakes and it screeched right past the station, it was going so fast, he had to back up; we got on and the Conductor said 'Hurry up; get on; hurry up!' 'We don't want to stop here long and so he rushed us on, and we took off'. [Laughing] That was the first really thrilling train ride I had ever taken in my boyhood.

AW: "Did you take the Peanut as well?"

RB: "Yes; we used to take the Peanut, my mother and I, and go to Boston occasionally and we would take the Peanut in the morning – and come back that evening. "

AW: "Would you take it as an outing?"

RB: “Yes, to go shopping usually, and then visiting different [places] like museums and Boston.

AW: “Isn’t it sad that we can’t do that now[go by train and back in one day].”

AW: “Anything else you can add about trains?”

RB: “ Let’s just say, it was the center of activity – this railroad station; on a Saturday night or Friday night people used to come in from the farms around the Village and shop and on Canaan Street, the automobiles would be lined up in front of the Drug Store or the movie theater, and a lot of people would go to the station waiting for the Peanut to come in and they’d visit and talk and have fun.”

And I remember the mail train that’d leave the mail, and Mr. Barnam – in the summer time, he had a wagon with big high wheels, he’d push the wagon with mail up to the post office and unload it, and in the Winter time, he had a sled and he’d bring the mail up from the train station to the post office on the sled to be sorted.

AW: And didn’t you say that there was a window they would close until it was sorted the mail and then they’d open back up?

RB: That’s right. They had certain hours you could pick up your mail, and every time the train would come thru with the mail they’d close the windows and sort it, and after it was sorted, they’d open the windows back up.

AW: And what about being able to pass a package, if a package was being delivered somehow the train person would stick his hand out, but if they missed, they would have to do it on the next pass.

RB: Oh that was – when the train was going by, they’d have to stick his arm out into a sling-like and there was a bag hanging on that slip, and he would catch the pouch in his arm, but if he missed – they’d have to wait until the next train. I forget what you call it, but....

AW: They’d have to wait until the train came back! It was just slow!! (Laughter)

AW: And you said, when the first crash happened, you were a little boy, and you had to finish your milking and finish all your farm chores.

RB: Yes, that was one of the later, August 1949, and I was in my early 20’s; I was milking and somebody, a neighbor going home, stopped in and said there’s been a train wreck in Canaan, so after milking, I went down and looked it over.

AW: That must have been very frightening.

RB: It was