

A Minor Derailment On the Pig Tail Line

An Otherwise Insignificant Event Brings
 Railfanning, Collecting, and History Together
 By David Hamilton

Growing up in the late 1970's and early 80's, along the former Pennsylvania Railroad Buffalo Division mainline in East Aurora, NY, I often felt short changed when it came to railfanning opportunities. The local depot had closed after passenger service ended in 1971, and most trains consisted of dirty black Penn Central engines hauling long, monotonous strings of coal hoppers. To me, the Pig Tail Line (so called by local railroaders because it twisted and turned its way through the mountains of northern Pennsylvania) lacked the excitement of the nearby Water Level Route.

That all changed one day when I was watching the Conrail switcher deliver a car to one of the local feed mills. Perhaps the engineer was intrigued by the fact that there was a kid out there who would rather watch trains than visit the nearby video game arcade, or maybe he just felt like talking to someone. Whatever



The crew of Conrail train WAOL-2 carefully descends from the mainline to spot a car at the former E.E. Godfrey feed mill in East Aurora, NY on a snowy day in the early 1980's.

spots where some less experienced crew had “put one on the ground.” There was no malice toward their fellow employees; railroaders just seem to enjoy relating stories of past wrecks. The old Godfrey feed mill siding was the scene of several such tales of woe, with its steep approach and short, stub-ended switchbacks. I could almost picture the looks on the faces of the poor engineers who ran off the end.

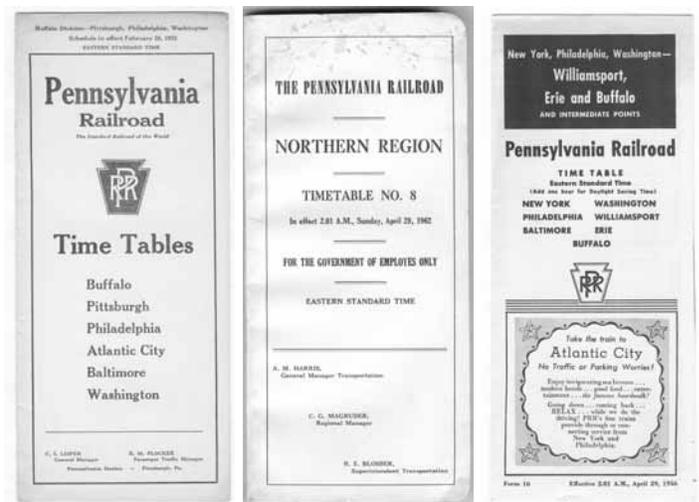


Conrail switcher WAOL-2 passes the entrance to the Bells supermarket in East Aurora, NY, enroute to pick up a car from the Griggs & Ball feed mill, in the early 1980's.

the reason, he invited me up into the cab of the engine, where I spent the first of what would be many afternoons riding around town while the train served the various industries.

Most of the crewmembers on this run hired out in the 1950's, and they had some fascinating stories of working on the line in the “good old days.” Many were original Pig Tail men, while a few came off the Erie Railroad when Conrail consolidated the Olean, NY terminal. The traveling switchers were overtime jobs, but the crews went home every night, so some fairly good seniority was required in order to hold them.

From the engineer's seat, performing the industry work in East Aurora could be a little tricky. The mainline had been elevated in 1934, as part of a grade crossing elimination project, and a spiderweb of sidings descended to the various feed mills and factories at street level. The old-timers made it look easy, though, even when easing a string of loaded covered hoppers down the icy hill in the winter. As we made our way slowly from one industry to the next, the engineers would point out



Pennsylvania RR public & employee timetables from different periods on the Pig Tail Line. Author's collection.

With a greater appreciation for the history of the Pig Tail, I started keeping an eye out for local memorabilia from the line. Soon, even the days of Conrail crews switching industries in East Aurora became another chapter in its history, as companies shut down or ceased using rail service. I moved away in 1986, and within a few years, there was no need for the train to stop there anymore.

Over time, I assembled a small collection of timetables and other railroadiana from the PRR Buffalo Division, including a few items specifically related to East Aurora. While it wasn't

Continued on Page 10

too hard to find this sort of memorabilia around Buffalo, the pickings were a little more slim when I relocated to the Albany area in 1992. This was the heart of New York Central and D&H country, and it almost seemed like there was a prohibition on Pennsy artifacts at the local shows.

It was a surprise then, a few years later, when I discovered several photocopied PRR discipline letters from the 1960's at the Albany train show. The dealer must have been rather puzzled when my eyes lit up at the contents of one of the letters: "Violation of... rules on May 4, 1963, at East Aurora, NY, in vicinity of Godfrey Coal Co.... resulting in engine 5630 running off end of stub track..." To everyone else, it was a letter about an insignificant derailment at a place that nobody had ever heard of, but to me it was an important piece of local history. I could almost hear the old-timer engineer telling the story again, as he pointed out where the locomotive ran off the end of the track.



Pennsylvania RR Pig Tail Line wayfreight BF-20, plows the cinders at the end of East Aurora's E.E. Godfrey feed mill siding on May 4, 1963. East Aurora Advertiser photo.

THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD
G 32 Rev-540

NOTICE OF DISCIPLINE FOR OFFENSE OCCURRING

ON Northern REGION

No. 197 June 27, 19 63

Name J. Adams, Jr. Occupation Engineman
Home Seniority District or Headquarters Northern Region

Discipline Two (2) days suspension (Time attending investigation and trial to apply.)

Date of Occurrence May 4, 1963 Engine _____ Train _____

Place East Aurora, New York - vicinity of Godfrey Coal Company

OUTLINE OF OFFENSE:--

"Violation of 3rd paragraph, Rule 400H-5, current Book of Rules, on May 4, 1963, at East Aurora, N. Y., in vicinity of Godfrey Coal Co., while in charge of engines 5630-5638 on BF-20 resulting in engine 5630 running off end of stub track at approximately 7:55 AM."

EMPLOYEE MUST SIGN THE FOLLOWING: Ass't. Supt. Trans.

This certifies that I was notified _____ 19 ____ that I would be disciplined in accordance with the above order, and I understand that same will be put into effect:

_____ days from the date of receipt of this notice or as soon thereafter as may be arranged.

_____ immediately.

Put into effect _____

Forwarded to _____ by _____ Date _____

Forwarded to _____ by _____ Date _____

Original to be returned to _____
Copy to be retained by employe.

If discipline is for employe of another region, forward Superintendent of Personnel of that region three copies of this form.

I happily paid the 25 cent asking price for the letter, and went home pleased that I had found something that provided a direct connection to the railroad stories that I had once enjoyed. While the discipline letter wasn't about the "Wreck of the Old 97" or anything else of historical importance, it had significance to me, and the odds of finding it by chance were certainly slim.

Over ten years later, I received an envelope of photos from my father, who had purchased several different views of PRR steam locomotives at an East Aurora estate sale. He also threw in a few pictures that he had run across while cleaning out the files at the *East Aurora Advertiser*, the town's weekly newspaper. Among several excellent photos of steam powered

passenger trains was one poorly framed shot of two diesels at an unidentified location. With "better" pictures to look at, though, I simply filed this one away for future research.

It wasn't until many months later that I ran across the photo again, while transferring part of my collection into albums and archival boxes. I noticed that the picture wasn't actually poorly framed; it was in fact centered on the pilot of engine 5630, which had run off the end of the track. There was no specific information or date on the photo, but a sticker on the back with the notation "Paper: EA" and "May" indicated that it had been taken by a reporter from the *Advertiser*. Having spent many hours exploring the right of way, I recognized the location as the siding behind East Aurora's Godfrey feed mill.

I had to dig out my box of Pennsylvania RR memorabilia just to double check, but sure enough, the derailment pictured in the photo was the same one that had been the subject of the discipline letter. It had taken 25 years, but I was able to put three different pieces of history together. Although my "collection" isn't quite as exciting as a set of bellbottoms with different colored globes, it was almost as enjoyable to assemble it. To me, collecting has always been



Unmarked Dietz No.39 with PRR globe, used on the Pig Tail Line.

about gathering slices of history, whether they are artifacts, information, or simply tales from old-timers. Even a minor derailment that occurred on the Pig Tail Line, back on May 4, 1963, was a small part of railroad history, and I am happy to have preserved memorabilia from it.