

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #14

(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

WHEN TRAIN WHISTLES WERE HEARD

From the time of its opening, the Chenango Canal had brought prosperity to the Town of Madison area. The canal, which was constructed from Binghamton in the south to Utica in the north, was a vast improvement over the original rough roads in the township. However, the canal had limitations; the amount of tonnage which could be carried, the speed which the boats traveled, and the closure of the canal during the winter months were definite drawbacks.

During the 1860's, a movement was begun in the Oriskany and Chenango valleys for the construction of a railroad line. It was proposed that the rail line begin at Utica, continue to Clinton and extend south to the Chenango valley, eventually ending at Binghamton. This route would essentially follow the same route as the Chenango Canal. You can imagine the opposition from those who had invested time and money to obtain the Chenango Canal, which had opened in 1837.

As the proponents of the railroad pointed out, more cargo could be transported, the railroad was a faster means of transportation, and it could be used all year long.

Many people began to see the canal as a slow and outdated mode of transport. They also saw other regions of the state beginning to build very successful rail lines. In February of 1867 the citizens of the Town of Madison were asked to meet for the purpose of bonding the township for the construction of the Utica, Clinton and Chenango Valley Railroad. The bond would be for \$100,000. (This railroad line was the one built through the Town of Madison and was sold in 1880 to become the Ontario & Western Railroad Company.)

Momentum grew rapidly and the October 27, 1868 edition of the Utica Morning Herald listed the individuals and businesses from Clinton, Oriskany Falls, Madison, Solsville, Bouckville, Hamilton, and Deansville (today's Deansboro), who favored the construction of the railroad. Among them was the firm of Brown, Beach & Mott, cider and vinegar manufacturers in Bouckville.

Samuel Rogers Mott saw the vast potential that a railroad would create if built through the Oriskany Valley. By 1869 he had purchased the interests of his partners and placed his full support behind the railroad project. His home, the former McClure's Tavern, would be adjacent to the new rail route. He would eventually sell a parcel of land next to his home for the railroad depot in Bouckville. In future years, Mr. Mott would build a new cider complex across the road from his home and next to the rail line.

The construction of the railroad through the Town of Madison was not an easy venture. Between the town line (west of Oriskany Falls) and Solsville there was an area known as the "Hogs Back" where the hillside had to be literally carved away. Many bridges also had to be built as the railroad crossed the Oriskany Creek many times. An article from the Hamilton Democratic-Republican stated: "The railroad crosses the plank road 6 times and the Oriskany Creek 7 times between the Summit in Bouckville and Oriskany Falls." The ponds at Lyon Mills and Solsville were literally cut in half by the newly built rail line. Huge amounts of dirt were brought in to create a firm base on which to place the ties and rails.

From Solsville the railroad headed south to Bouckville, Pecksport, and on into Hamilton. The route was much more level than in the previous area. Oddly enough, the materials for the new railroad – ties, rails, stone, etc. were often brought to the work site by using the Chenango Canal. Talk about helping to put yourself out of business!!

As construction progressed, railroad depots needed to be built. These were built at Solsville and Bouckville within our township. Henry J. Edgerton was awarded the contract to build both depots. They would be board and batten structures, 26 x 60 feet. He was to be paid \$1,900 for each. (The depot at Solsville was used as a storage facility for many years following the abandonment of the rail line. Eventually the structure was taken down by Jerome Werbela and used for the sheathing for his new home. Two-inch thick planking made for a solid house.)

In addition to the depots, station agents needed to be appointed at each location. Allen Curtis received the appointment at Solsville and Charles Dedrick at Bouckville. Their job entailed selling passenger tickets and sending and receiving freight. With shipments of hops, cheese, and Mott's products, this must have been a hectic job at times. As an example of how hectic the job could be, the Mott's Company purchased 300 boxcar loads of apples from New Jersey in October of 1894. This would help to keep the plant running day and night.

Things did not always go smoothly along the railroad line. In 1872 the ice was so thick along the trestle at Solsville Pond that it raised the tracks 3 feet from the original level. In 1878, Samuel Mott decided that the freight charges being assessed were too high and he withdrew his business from the local railroad and transported his cider products to Morrisville by wagon to be shipped on the Midland Railroad. (Soon, Mr. Mott would not only get a better shipping price, but extra sidings next to his new cider works across from his home on the Cherry Valley Turnpike.)

Theft was also a problem at the depots. People assumed that with all of the passengers and freight going through the office that there must be large sums of money on hand. In 1881 the depot at Solsville had \$40.00 stolen from the money drawer. The same depot was robbed again in 1886, but only \$4.00 was stolen. In May of 1892 the depots at Solsville and Bouckville were both broken into, but the thieves only made off with \$1.40 and a small quantity of tobacco. The thieves were back at it in May of the same year at Solsville. With bills and change, they stole almost \$80.00 this time.

These were not the only problems incurred by the railroad company. In February of 1873, a coal train ran off the track at Bouckville when a switch had been turned the wrong way. The engine was turned nearly bottom side up, three of the cars were tipped over, and two more nearly so. The engineer and fireman were slightly hurt. The brakeman in car #5 jumped into a snow bank and was not hurt.

In January of 1881, a team of horses was left by the side of the tracks at Tyler's Mill, near Solsville, while a hired man was checking on an order of grain. When the 3:00 train came through, the horses became frightened and unfortunately ran the wrong way. The sleigh was demolished, but the horses were somehow unhurt. In 1882, Mr. Holland was loading hop poles at the Solsville depot when a train came up the track and frightened his team of horses. They took off, the wagon hitting one of the railroad sign posts by the highway. The team was unhurt, but the wagon and sign post were demolished.

In the year 1883 a coal train was passing between Lyon Mills and Solsville, near Fisk's Mill (formerly Tyler's Mill), when a rail broke loose and three coal cars tumbled off the track. June of 1898 saw a milk wagon parked near the tracks at Solsville struck by the engine of a southbound train.

In March of 1932 Milford Davis was seriously injured when his truck collided with a freight train at Livermore Crossing on the Canal Rd. The truck was dragged several hundred feet before the train could be stopped. A young boy riding with Mr. Davis was dragged along in the truck also, but escaped injury.

In 1897, sparks from a passing train caused the loss of a barn at the farm of Smith Edgerton on the Canal Rd., halfway between Bouckville and Solsville. Sparks from a passing train were also the cause of the destruction of the depot at Bouckville in September of 1911. The wooden structure was found to be in flames one hour after the passing of the 3:00 a.m. train. A new depot was built and opened in December of 1912. (Following the closing of the railroad line in 1957 the building has had many uses, but is the home of Depot Antiques today.)

Nature also provided an unusual happening for our railroad line. We have already mentioned the problems that ice could pose, but in 1917 it was an intense rain storm that led to the collapse of the dam at Solsville.

The water from the pond rushed down the valley, sweeping away the dams at Fisk's Mill and Lyon Mills also. The train tracks, which ran through the ponds, were seriously damaged.

Of course, just as during the years when the canal was in operation, there were accidents of a more serious nature in regard to human life. Those covered in the newspapers of the area are recounted here:

1892 – Frank Cash: Conductor on the Ontario & Western R.R.

Killed as he fell between two cars to his death.

1896 – Daniel Peckham: Local farmer returning from delivering grain

Killed at the Hog's Back Crossing.

1901 – Rudy Ankings: Walking near the tracks

Killed at Fisk's Crossing.

1916 – Mr. Halcomb: Riding a motorcycle

Killed in front of the depot in Bouckville when he ran into a freight train.

1927 – Four pea pickers: Pickers were in a truck

Killed at Fisk's Crossing when struck by the O & W gasoline car. (A fifth person died later.)

1946 – Norman Kaiser: Walking near the tracks

Killed at Fisk's Crossing.

These were tragic events for small communities to deal with. Ironically, there were just as many deaths during the canal era. And of course, today we continually worry about automobile deaths.

If you were near the train depot at Solsville or Bouckville, you would see some unusual things arriving or passing through over the years. Imagine the enjoyment of the children when the circus train arrived in town or the patriotic feeling when the troop trains passed through during the years of WW1. The arrival of loads of hop poles in the spring certainly signaled the start of another farming season. And of course, there were the special trains arriving with spectators to watch the baseball games of the Bouckville Summits. Political speakers coming to the hotels at Solsville and Bouckville, traveling salesmen, patrons of the hotels at Madison Lake, and buyers for hops and cheese would all add to the excitement of the train era.

So what happened to our railroad system? Just as the canal gave way to a faster and more dependable mode of transportation, so did the railroad. As the years passed, trucks and tractor trailers assumed more and more of the freight. They had the advantage of not having to stay on a track system. They could deliver goods directly to your home or place of business. Cars also became more popular and the sale of tickets for the passenger trains fell off sharply.

The Ontario & Western Railroad, once such a proud and profitable enterprise, was finally given the nickname of the "Old & Weary." As losses mounted, the decision was made to abandon the line. Finally, the day came when the railroad ended – March 29, 1957. The rails were taken up soon after and the warning signs removed. The railroad through the Town of Madison is now but a memory.