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SADDLE BROOK HISTORICAL SOCIETY – SEPTEMBER 2015

PASSAIC JUNCTION STATION REVISITED AND THE COALBURGS

When I posted the article *Passaic Junction Station (July, 2015)*, I didn't anticipate writing a follow-up. Since then, knowledgeable people have contacted me with additional information. Ray Abel, a longtime Saddle Brook resident and a wonderful community volunteer, sent information concerning the actual spur or junction that begins about one hundred feet west of the Erie bridge on Midland Avenue. It's actually in Elmwood Park and continues south to Passaic. The tracks cross Route 46 in



Elmwood Park. This answered my question concerning why the station, even though in our township, was called the "Passaic" Junction Station.

A second contact was made by a former student of mine when I was Principal of Franklin School in the 1970s, Ron Vassallo. Ron is a railroad history enthusiast who grew up on Lyster Avenue and could see both the Erie Bergen County line and the Passaic Junction Station yard from his home. "I would hear all of the switching at night all year, waking me up." Ron also sent aerial photographs of the surrounding area which included the coalburgs, or coal pockets huge cone shaped piles of anthracite coal which ran from Passaic Junction Station, intermittently, to Rochelle Avenue in Rochelle Park. He also forwarded a photograph of an early Midland railroad steam engine from the 1880's which was the same as our Suzie Q, a super find!

A third contact was made by Ron's friend and fellow historian, Bob Mohowski. Bob emailed the following:

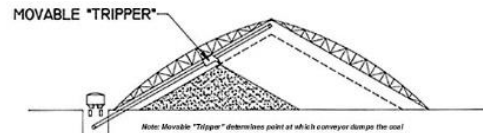
I believe the name Passaic Junction came from the fact that NYS&W's Passaic Branch (AC Branch) left their main line just west of Midland Ave. The importance of the connection with the Erie came after the Erie got control of the NYS&W to ship coal all year long and store it in summer months in anticipation of the winter demand season. Also, Erie had heavier rail installed on the NYS&W at Passaic Junction and eastward so Erie coal trains could go right into Little Ferry Yard eventually moved to the NYS&W's coal dumper at Edgewater. The Passaic-Clifton-Garfield-Paterson area had lots of industries

that received and shipped by rail, and so many required coal for boilers and furnaces not to mention all the coal required for domestic heating as well. NYS&W used call letters "AC" for Passaic. I also recall the U.S. Rubber company, Oakanite and others in the Dundee section that of lots of rail service.

Somewhere in reading, I came across the word

trimmers in relation to the coalburgs. I telephoned Ron who described them as large conveyors which topped-off the coal piles. Within days, I received pages of

trimmer information and related pictures. I had forgotten that in the 1940's many homes, including mine at 586 Willow Avenue, had coal furnaces. The coal was delivered into our neighbor's driveway and ran by gravity through shoots into our basements. When cold weather arrived we shoveled it into our furnace where it was burnt, providing heat for our house. It was messy and a lot of work. Homeowners had to continually remove and relocate the ashes. Much of Saddle Brook's property, Zuckerberg's for example, received the ashes as landfill.



Ron provided numerous pages of trimmer information, the essence of which follows:

Designed by James M. Dodge, the system used a conveyor (trimmer) arranged at an angle that would match the "angle of repose" of heaped anthracite. (Commodities such as coal, iron ore, rock salt and crushed stone will naturally form conical piles whose angles are characteristic and predictable. For anthracite, it was about 27 degrees.) Hopper cars would dump their loads into a bin, and the conveyor buckets would move it up an ever greater distance as the pile increased in height. By beginning the pile at the low end of the conveyor, close to the ground, breakage or degradation of the coal was reduced. As the pile increased in height, the discharge point moves up the conveyor. If the pile were enlarged concentrically, that is if the conveyor extended the length and height of its support bridge, coal would fall a much longer distance and shatter. The conveyor's bridge was supported by a steel structure of equal length and at the same angle to the ground, thus creating an isosceles triangle. Several guide wires extended from the top and were anchored just beyond the circumference of the coal pile.

Several of these conveyors or trimmers at one site were called a coal plant and different sizes of coal were stored in different piles. For domestic use, egg, stove and nut sizes were popular. Commercial furnaces preferred rice and buckwheat sizes. I'm not familiar with the capacity of the Middletown or Cadosia plants but the Pennsylvania Coal Co. built one at Passaic Jct. on the Susquehanna early in the century consisting of ten trimmers and a total capacity



of 250,000 tons. That's equal to 5000 fifty ton hoppers. (NYS&W trustee, Walter Kidde, claimed that 400,000 tons could be stored there.)

Two of our former senior residents had contributed related information to our history, *Saddle Brook: A Portrait of Our Past*. Charles Mund had noted that his father worked for the railroad during the Great Depression hosing dust from the coal that was going to be used by the factories in Paterson. This was brutal work. Coal dust was highly combustible. Eleanore Yelavich, contributed the following:

There was something of note in Saddle Brook which I recall was mentioned in one of our schoolbooks (geography). It was the Coal Pockets. It was the largest of its kind and was therefore included in the lesson books. The Coal Pockets were one of the nation's largest providers. During the depression years, there were many without funds to pay for coal deliveries who trespassed and filled their sacks with coal. We children were forbidden to play down there. There could be danger, and there were often hobos around who hopped on and off freight trains. We went down there anyway. Unfortunately, we couldn't hide the fact from our parents - coal soot covered our shoes and most of us!

Special thanks go to the wonderful people who contributed to the above; Ray Abel, Ron Vassallo and Bob Mohowski. Many pages of information about the above will be placed in our Historical Society files for those who would like additional, detailed resources. Photographs were provided with the permission of the Ontario & Western Railway Historical Society, Inc.

Township Historian: Jack Wasdyke