

Mike Robertson's O&W

My name is Mike Robertson and I am the grandson of Vincent Robertson a former employee of the New York Ontario & Western Railway. I live in Norwich New York about a block from the former O&W Freight House. I have many memories of the railroad even though it ended its life when I was eight years old.

I relayed some of those memories to John Taibi and he was gracious enough to include them in his wonderful book, *Remembering the New York Ontario & Western Railway Oswego to Sidney & Branches* on pages 280 & 289

As a child I was allowed many more freedoms than children today. It seemed like I was always on my 20" Schwinn Hornet. It came with a big black seat that actually had real springs underneath for a "smoother ride" and of course that oversized basket perched over the front tire. As clumsy as it appeared it was always much faster than my brothers crappy Hawthorne. One of my favorite places to ride was down on the Freight house loading docks. They were huge. All concrete, flat and long. Once in a while a train would show up and I remember staring at them in awe of the sights and sounds. Most of all the thoughts they invoked of far away places beyond my little world.

My father did not share in my love of that railroad, a trait I couldn't understand at the time. On our many trips over east hill to visit my relatives in Sidney we sometimes would see a short train on the tracks that paralleled old county route 35. Dad would never slow down to allow me to gain a better view of it no; he kept the Studebaker cruising along at a clip just under that magic speed that would bring a quick admonishments from my mother next to him in the front seat. I usually had to climb up on the rear window deck (no seatbelts or child seats back then) to watch as the headlight vanished from view around a curve or in the dense trees that lined that route.

Later in life I came to understand my father's lack of devotion to the Old Woman. Our family was victim to many accidents and grief associated with the railroad. His Father. Vincent a holster in the Norwich Yard, died while walking home from work after suffering a heart attack.

The published obituary dated 11-13-1942 stated " Vincent Amos Robertson of Grove Avenue aged 55 years died suddenly at 6:45 Friday morning while on his way home from work at the O&W shops where he was employed as a engine hostler. Mr. Robertson had complained of feeling ill while at work but believing it nothing serious continued at his job until morning."... It goes on to say, " Mr. Robertson had been employed in that capacity for 25 years.

My mother's uncle, a fireman on the road, was struck and killed by a hit and run motorist in the Mayfield yard near the roundhouse. The newspaper accounts are dramatic.

Norwich Sun Monday February 27, 1939. "Struck by Auto, Jas. O'Brien Dies. O&W Fireman and Engineer Victims of Hit and Run Driver. Struck by a hit and run driver after

they had finished their night's work, James O'Brien, O. & W. fireman, is dead and his companion, Engineer Coyle lies unconscious in St. Joseph's Hospital at Carbondale, Pa. Suffering from serious injuries.

Norwich Sun Tuesday February 28, 1939 (Day two)

Body of James O'Brien to Be Brought To Norwich Wednesday for Interment

O&W Fireman Victim of Hit and Run Motorist at Mayfield to be Buried in St. Paul's cemetery in Afternoon - James Coyle, Engineer, also Dies of Injuries.

Mr. O'Brien, 49 was well known in Norwich, where his two sisters, Mrs. Frank Bird and Mrs. Elizabeth Kelly reside. Engineer James Coyle who was struck by the same car that hit Mr. O'Brien also died as a result of his injuries, but lived several hours after Mr. O'Brien succumbed.

Both railroad men were residents of Carbondale and each died in St. Joseph's Hospital at Carbondale several hours apart. Services for Mr. O'Brien will be held in St. Rose church at Carbondale at 9:30 Wednesday morning and the body will be brought to Norwich for internment in St. Paul's cemetery between 1:30 and 2 o'clock Wednesday afternoon.

O'Brien was born in Oxford. He had been a railroader for 30 years all of that time with the N.Y.O.& W. For about 12 years he lived in Oneida while he was a fireman on an O&W freight engine. He moved to Carbondale, Pa seven years ago and was a freight engineer at the time of his death. To scores of Norwich friends O'Brien was better known as "Shamrock."

State police, investigating the accident at Mayfield have not been able to identify the hit and run driver of the machine which struck down Engineer Coyle and Fireman O'Brien. Pieces of a broken headlight lens and part of the front of the death car are the only clues in possession of state motor police who are in charge of the accident investigation. The mishap occurred near the start of the new county road at Childs, 200 yards from the O&W office.

Hit soon after leaving.

The well known employees came into the O&W yard shortly after 10 o'clock Saturday night and registered off from work at 10:15 pm. They then walked to the Childs road for a ride to their homes in Carbondale. It is believed that they were struck by the hit and run driver within five minutes after they had left the railroad yard, which runs along the side of the highway.

A passing motorist noticed the men in the ditch and called two ambulances. Mr. O'Brien was found to be suffering from a fractured skull, fractures of both legs, deep laceration of the body and internal injuries. Mr. Coyle, an examination revealed, incurred a fractured skull a brain concussion, a fractured left leg, cuts of the face and body. Mr. O'Brien died at 6 o'clock Sunday night. Mr. Coyle succumbed Monday night.

Checks on clues.

Private Walter Cebular of Peckville substation, motor police began an investigation. From the position of the bodies it was indicated that the men were not on the road when struck by the car. It was evident that the driver was going at an excessive rate of speed and was off the highway when he hit the railroaders.

Evening Sun Thursday March 2, 1939 (Day 4)

Hit and Run Driver Reported Arrested

Motorist who struck James O'Brien caught by Police Officers

Information has been received in Norwich by relatives of the late James O'Brien, that the driver of the hit and run machine which struck and fatally injured Mr. O'Brien in Mayfield Saturday night, is now under arrest at Carbondale. The machine was occupied by two men and two girls and after the accident the driver of the machine is said to have fled to New Jersey. The other male occupant of the machine is said to have confessed and it is reported that police went to New Jersey and brought the driver to Pennsylvania.

Mr. O'Brien, O&W fireman and Engineer James Coyle of Carbondale, were both fatally injured when struck by the automobile near Mayfield yards Saturday night.

Evening Sun Friday March 3, 1939 (Day 5)

Death Car Driver Is Given Sentence

Motorist who struck and Killed O'Brien Gets Five Years.

Justice moves quick in Pennsylvania, according to a dispatch from Scranton, in which it is stated that the driver of the death car which struck and fatally injured James O'Brien O&W fireman and Engineer James Coyle, last Saturday night, was Thursday sentenced to five years in the county jail at Scranton by Judge Will Leach.

Joseph Bernatowich, 24, who admitted to state police that he as the hit and run driver of a car that struck the two railroaders on a road at Mayfield late Saturday night, confessed that he had taken "a drink of gin and three glasses of beer" prior to the accident.

A note here: I am a retired police officer and I must say, the wheels of Justice have certainly slowed down since 1939.

Another death of a family member occurred when another of my mother's uncles suffered a heart attack while aboard a train in Randallsville. I don't have many of the details surrounding his death other than the train was turned and returned to Norwich where he was taken to the hospital passing away that evening. His funeral notice is full of O&W notables, "Acting as bearers were Charles McGuire, James W. Flanagan, Roy D. Bloom Charles Russell Thomas Golden and Leon Wood all O&W employees"

So, now I understand his indifference. I, on the other hand, was always interested. I would look for signs along the right of way and grab a quick look for a railroad type building in every town we passed through.

As I grew up my dad and I began our model railroading careers. Dad was a flat track around the 4 by 8 sheet of plywood man while I dreamt of those beautiful vistas of John Allen's Gorre & Daphetid depicted in the Model Railroader magazines. As time went on and we built one layout after another I was able to gradually gain elevation on our layouts. By the time I was in High School we had a fairly sized layout with a few places for some bridges and tunnels. My father's opinion of a tunnel was, "What do you want that for, you can't see the train while it's in there." Ok, maybe just one then.

When it came time for the first big bridge, a five foot long trestle, that I had hoped would resemble the famous Lyon Brook Trestle I was brought back to reality when I came home from football practice and my dad was busy at work constructing the bents using ¼ inch square basswood. He was so proud of his accomplishments that it would have been futile to explain the "scale" of such a choice. So, the bridge was built and stained a jet black. He was very happy with it but I couldn't share in the joy. It didn't look anything like the pictures in all the magazines. Over the next year that bridge became a sore spot in our conversations.

One day in school science class we were involving ourselves in the properties of electrical batteries and I learned about the acids that are contained in wet cell batteries and what it can do!!! So, I made a trip to the local auto supply store and purchased a small bottle of battery electrolyte. Carefully and never when he was around, I would use an eyedropper and place some of the acid along the entire bridge.

Then one evening while we were running the Mantua Heavy Pacific and a passenger train it began the climb to the bridge. I cannot tell you the anticipation I felt as that train approached the bridge but I was rewarded with a sight that still brings a smile to my face. The engine began it's crossing and right off you could see that something was happening. The engine was metal and fairly heavy and as it moved you could see it sway back and forth with each turn of the drivers. When about halfway across the acid soaked wood just turned to a grainy powder and engine, cars and wood pieces came crashing down onto the scenery below. It almost happened in slow motion. My father's reaction was priceless. He exclaimed with astonishment, "Jeezzuss, did you see that " We discussed what could have happened and how surprised we both were. He was a little upset but being witness to such a scale disaster was, in itself enjoyable. Then he started feeling bad about how much time he had spent on it and all that...I quickly volunteered to fix it up and maybe even make a different kind. So began my career as a model builder. I found that I liked being able to create things using my imagination. Over time the skills have improved to where I don't mind trying almost anything.

The present layout is my sixth counting all the way back to that plastic double loop thing. The challenge is that the space I have available is limited. One room that measures approximately 12 by 15 feet. It was smaller but I moved one wall making the bathroom smaller. All that was done prior to my wife arriving otherwise I'm sure I'd still be in the 12 X 12 original bedroom. The table is typical open grid with homosote sub

roadbed. I, after reading an article by Tony Koester in Model Railroader, decided to lay my own track mostly to save money on turnouts. I use one central yard. It has six tracks. I designated 2 tracks to represent Norwich, one for both Sidney and Walton and two for Cadosia. The layout has 4 reverse loops that allow the trains to run in all directions. Using the timetable listing of stations along the O&W from Norwich to Cadosia I've placed an industry at each location. So, in theory my trains can go from Norwich passing Oxford, Guilford, Parker, New Berlin Jct, D&H interchange, and arrive at Sidney. I haven't tried to model specific buildings along the O&W except for one interlocking tower and some of the small buildings like handcart sheds and tool sheds. I usually put something there that fits in the space.

Most of the motive power is old. I have an Athearn SW-7 from 1982, a GP-30 (made from an Athearn GP-35 shell and lots of body putty that dates from 1985).



Before the exquisite models of F-units that are now available, I reworked an Athearn F-7 into an F-3 also I used the Cary Metal shells for a set of FT's. They would certainly have brought down that trestle long before the Mantua engine did. They are heavy.



As for a motive power roster, I keep running engines that I like. I'm an EMD fan. I keep a set of GP-60's and a GP-50 for my modern running but I still have a caboose on all trains.



I scratch built some of the wooden 8000 series cabooses and then to show the passage of time I have a few of the Roundhouse 4 window cabooses painted red with white lettering.



The new Athearn Wide Vision cabooses painted in the yellow and gray scheme represents the modern era.



Operation

Because I have such a small space and am the only person running the railroad, I have not gone to a DCC system.

I only run one train at a time either a fast freight or a local. The fast freights US-2 and AW-2 move cars between yards southbound while SU-1 and WA-1 move them North.

Local Freight #34 handles cars between Norwich and Cadosia while # 33 does the Northbound from Cadosia to Norwich.

I have 4 coal mines along a route that depicts the Capouse branch. The largest mine is named for my father, Vernon Mining Co. It has 3 loading tracks and a small yard.



I've named another mining complex after my son, Vince. They are Vinco Mine #1 and Vinco Mine #2 each has one track and loads about 4 cars each. The last mine is just a suggested location that has room for 2 cars. There is no building there. The mine runs Trains 18 and 19 are run separate from the rest of the layout.

As for the operation of the road, I have been dabbling in a car-card and waybill system but to make it more flexible I keep a box of all industries with multiple waybills in each slot. When a business wants a new car, I just pull one of the waybills and it tells me where to enter the car on the road (usually either Norwich or Cadosia) at the completion of the cycle the car is removed from the layout and the waybill returned to the. I've made my own car cards using commercial No. 7 3-1/2 x 6-1/2 coin envelopes. I print two cars on one card then just cut them in half.

Fig.

<p style="text-align: center;">TANK SHP X 3245</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DUPONT CHEMICALS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">40 ft Single Dome</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">40 ft Single Door New York Central BOX NYC 1023245</p>
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Waybills are made up by cutting sheets of standard paper into 3 x 5 inch pieces and then printing out the waybill from my computer. For 4 cycle waybills I place the printed waybill in the printer tray printed side up and then print the back side

	NYO&W Ry. Waybill 1
YARD: Routing VIA: TO: FROM: Contents	
NYO&W Ry. WAYBILL 2 YARD: Routing VIA: TO: FROM: Contents:	

Cars are sent to the nearest yard on the fast freights, then moved to the location by the appropriate local freight. If the train is short (certainly an O&W trait) the fast freights may do some set-outs and pick-ups. A usual operating session for a train can run as much as an hour and a half or longer depending on how many of the 20 industries I want to service.

I hope you've enjoyed my tale of how I keep my memories of the O&W alive. She still has trouble on the grades and curves and most of the trains are short 20 cars or less but, at least she's still moving freight just a block from where the real ones used to be. "When the far-off whistle made dreamers of us all." Thank you Mr. Helmer.





New York Ontario & Western Railway Co.

Michael V. Robertson Superintendent Northern Division
Norwich, New York
System Map

