

The Railroad's Importance, Then and Now Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

How do you feel about train whistles? O.K. if not too close? Waves of nostalgia if you are middle aged or above? Have you noticed that there are more toots locally in the last few years? Well, there are, and this article examines why.

We've done many stories on the railroad. Several years ago we considered the Northwestern Line in its heyday, with dozens of both passenger and freight trains each day. Counting four toots to each crossing times the total number of trains, I came up with 820 train whistles per day, a regular cacophony of sounds.

However, my estimate may have been low. Local railroad expert Mark Carlson spoke recently at the second annual meeting of the Lake States Railway Historical Association and said that at its peak in 1911, there were 8 passenger trains each way daily, plus 40 freights, a total of 56 trains.

With 5 audible crossings and four toots per crossing, my math comes up with an

incredible 1120 piercing whistles per day! And that did not include the switch engines, or the woolen mill whistle! Also we have the fire whistle and a noon whistle. We did include the dangerous Lynn Street crossing, before the viaduct was installed.

Annoying at times, those toots meant business and commerce and jobs. There were even jobs for boys known as "call boys", and Catherine Rinkob remembers the boys rapping on the window pane before dawn to remind her father to get up and go to work.

The Good Old Railroad Days

Those whistling days were back when rail was king, both for travel and commerce. Built along Devils Lake in Sept., 1871, the local Northwestern Line was a welcome lifeline to this struggling river town, especially when Baraboo was named a division point. Even the first Mayor of Baraboo, C.A. Swineford, was a railroad engineer.

After the turn of the century the division point was slowly gobbled up by ever-hungry Madison. A concurrent national effort to provide all-weather superhighways led eventually to the rise of the trucking and auto travel industries, and the railroad faded to near extinction. By the 1960's Baraboo had no passenger trains and only an occasional freight.

Formerly going on to Minneapolis or Mankato and beyond, the railroad was

gradually abandoned, though by luck and hard work the present line remained viable to Reedsburg. This was largely because the Pink Lady quartzite quarry in Rock Springs opened in 1956, Quartzite was used all over the country as a more permanent railroad grade than gravel.

Revival

In recent times the growing industries in Baraboo and Reedsburg became increasingly good customers, and an interesting thing has happened. Despite a recent suspension of shipping from the Pink Lady, the local industries have kept the line viable and profitable for business.

Back to those train whistles—yes, there are more now than a few years ago, when pretty much only the Pink Lady quarry was still operating. They sound good, for they mean opportunity and industry. The last whistle from a steam engine was in 1956, but the Diesels give a fair imitation.

For those who like statistics, we can give you several, thanks to Virgil Kasper, long time President of the Pink Lady Rail Transit Commission, but now retired. This group, organized in 1988, arose out of a meeting between Kasper and Assemblyman Thompson in 1984.

At that time railroad grades all over the country were being abandoned, business having shifted to the trucking industry. The government operated the interstate highway system with

taxpayer funds, but the railroads had to maintain their roadbeds themselves.

The line Northwest from Reedsburg with its three tunnels was abandoned in 1987 as part of this consolidation. Thanks to the railroads' thirst for quartzite, the line to Reedsburg remained open because of the Pink Lady quarry.

Industrial Use Increases

Local industry only utilized 618 freight cars all year in 1988. As the years passed, industries rediscovered the economy and convenience of bulk transport, and by 2007, 6,680 rail cars were used. This is an increase of 1000%. Even when the Pink Lady closed, there was still enough local business to keep the line viable.

Yard switching is now available 5 times a week, accounting for the increased train toots you've been hearing! With recent word that the Pink Lady may reopen soon, another whistling engine will be heard.

The rail grade is now owned by Union Pacific (1995) but leased and operated by Wisconsin and Southern Railroad (1996). Though the Baraboo-Reedsburg line is only 5% of their trackage, it accounts for 11% of the carloads handled by WSOR system.

In its day the Railroad was by far the greatest of Baraboo's industries, resulting in a surge in population and prosperity. There were some 500 employees

locally, and the average monthly wage was \$60, a good job then.

There were eight passenger trains in each direction daily, and the famous 400 Streamliner once served Baraboo. Double track, now gone, had been installed in 1896.

In its time the Ringling Circus, with its own railroad yard and shops, was a major patron, as was the Gollmar Circus. By 1918 both circuses were gone—Gollmar sold and divided up, and Ringling merged with the Barnum and Bailey unit in Bridgeport, Conn.

Today rail service is regaining its importance. There have been problems, however, and Devils Lake flooding is one of them. The news, however, is good. Stay tuned for the next article,

As personal transportation, improved, there were fewer trains. Here, a convention of “flivvers” downtown.

