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THE SHEPAUG RAILROAD

BY

ELLEN IRWIN WHITMAN

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To some of you the Shepaug Railroad, the line from Hawleyville to Litchfield, is just a tradition, or a way to get to Steep Rock Park. To others it means the lumbering, three-a-week freight trains of yesteryear that had a disconcerting habit of appearing just as you were about to negotiate a grade crossing. Some of us old-timers, however, remember when the railroad was an important part of the town's life, delivering, for example, lard by the ton to Bader Brothers.

Built shortly after the War Between the States, the railroad was expected to make this region comparable to the Naugatuck Valley. There was marble, there was granite, there was iron--moreover, there was water power. One Major Edwin McNeill of Litchfield was the determined soul who dreamed up the idea of a railroad and finally put it through, in spite of farmers with shotguns who greeted his surveyors. The cost ran to over a million dollars, this amount being furnished by the section the road went through.

On January 1, 1872, the Shepaug Railroad was opened. It had three locomotives, the "Waramaug, Shepaug, the Weantinaug, which someone said "augured well for the future". It even had a tunnel 495 feet long, hewn through solid rock. Leave Litchfield at 8:30, arrive at Hawleyville at 11, better than 12 miles an hour. The crookedest railroad east of

California--32 miles to cover 17 airline miles. Number of curves, 147 or 200 if you counted the little jogs in a curve. A cousin of the late Ford Seeley, Edward Seeley of Roxbury, now 94 years old, recalls a trip he took in his youth, and I quote:

"I went to Holland to bring back some cattle. I crossed the ocean twice and I never got seasick until I came up on the Shepaug."

But marble and granite couldn't stand the competition of Portland cement, while the advent of steel and the development of Midwest resources checked the exploitation of Roxbury's iron. The late Eugene Meramble of Litchfield a few years back could recall the good old days when Litchfield, Bantam, and Washington each shipped a carload of milk daily, and he engineered trains of 20 carloads of ice from the storehouses on Bantam Lake. He had seen a hundred men at work in the Mine Hill quarries in Roxbury, and train loads of granite on the mile-long siding there.

Accidents were few, owing to the vigilance of our own John E. Carlson, section foreman, who, as well as Mr. Meramble, was awarded the diamond studded gold pin and golden railroad pass given by the New Haven Railroad for 50 years of faithful service. The Shepaug Railroad, I should add, had become a branch of the New Haven in 1898.

I have a picture here of Valley Station, a flag station built privately by E. H. Van Ingen especially for the use of the Holiday House girls, though others were also permitted to use it. Valley Station Bridge was the smallest suspension bridge Roebling ever built. The girls would board the train, loaded to the gills with flowers, fresh eggs, and other vacation trophies. On one occasion a girl's package,

tossed into the baggage rack seemed to be leaking. Presently the yolk of a large egg (probably one from my mother's chickens) descended upon the derby hat of the gentleman sitting beneath. Perhaps he was already feeling like Edward Seeley. Anyway, he arose in his wrath, and hurled the offending parcel - - flowers, eggs, birch bark, milkweed pods and all, straight through the window.

The man in the derby was probably a summer visitor vacationing in Litchfield or at Warmaug or Bantam Lake. At one time there was even a week-end express from New York which reached here at 4 o'clock Saturday afternoon and left for the return trip at 7 o'clock Monday morning. Now and then there were special trains, as for Senator Orville Platt's funeral in 1905, bearing Vice-President Fairbanks and numerous senators, silk hats, frock coats and all. (T.R. was hunting big game in the Far West or he would have been here, too.)

But by 1920 the automobile, both for pleasure and business, had doomed the old Shepaug. It was certainly pleasanter, on a winter Sunday afternoon, to drive to New Milford to get a better, faster train than to meander along the banks of the Shepaug in the last car of a milk train equipped with a stove for heating. A brief experiment with a gasoline-powered coach dubbed the "Toonerville" by the Mykeham Rise girls - - and then from 1930 to 1948 just a freight line.

Now that even the rails are gone you can walk or drive along portions of the old roadbed, and glimpse the picturesque spots we used to watch for from the train windows. The trains themselves, though they may have looked shabby in recent years, were something special - - they had to be to survive this run. We somehow looked on them as one does a church or school or any familiar landmark, because they were a part of us when we were very young. We miss them.

Ellen Irwin Whitman 1954